

## Modeling Alternative Assessment for Pre-Service Middle Level Teachers

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*College assessment models for our future middle school teachers must be varied, on-going, engaging, equitable and empowering. Traditional assessments do not often model the critical components of what makes assessment appropriate for middle level students. To provide the appropriate model for future middle level teachers, the establishment of multiple assessment types clearly provides more opportunity for equity, engagement, differentiated learning styles and what is known about developmentally responsive middle level assessment.*

Formative assessment models for our future middle school teachers must be varied, on-going, engaging, equitable and empowering. As we offer new ways of assessing students in the middle school classrooms, it is critical to provide the pre-service middle school teachers college level assessment models. Frequently the assessment models provided in our college classrooms are traditional summative assessments such as mid-terms, finals and papers or a project. Traditional summative assessments do not often model the critical components of what makes assessment appropriate for middle level students (NMSA, 2010). Although the traditional tests provide certain models for assessment, they are models that pre-service teachers have seen repeatedly in their K-12 experience. The repetitious traditional assessment methods imprint only a few models which do not fit our research and understanding of how students in the middle level learn best. To provide the appropriate model for future middle level teachers, the establishment of multiple assessment types clearly provides more opportunity for equity, engagement, differentiated learning styles and in generally what is known about developmentally responsive middle level assessment.

Student evaluation is at the core of middle level instruction and assessment. Developmentally responsive middle level education must approach instruction and assessment in different ways. Since instruction is integrated with assessment the traditional assessment approach does not provide enough models for the future middle level teacher with regard to assessment. At the heart of the varied assessment styles is the ability to differentiate instruction and meet students individual learning styles through assessment. Allowing college students to choose from a menu of alternative ways to present their knowledge, gives the pre-service teachers the empowerment to prove their understanding and depth of knowledge in multiple ways. College assessments must include alternative ways of evaluation which are not typically found in higher education such as brochures, concept webs, vocabulary, power points, outlines, summaries, videos and other creative kinds of projects. Given such opportunities, students often go way beyond the "required" memorization of content required for a mid-term or final. Most

important is the pre-service teachers will have the alternative assessment experience to implement the same procedures as future teachers.

To create true differentiated learning that will meet the learning styles and needs of young adolescents, pre-service middle level teachers must be convinced that alternative assessment works and be comfortable in using such a style of assessment. As high stakes testing continues, and middle level students are required to perform in the most traditional styles of testing, it is also critical that teachers understand how the critical information and in many cases much richer information can be gained through alternative formative assessment. New teachers need practice taking and evaluating alternative assessments to be able to implement their own classrooms. The number of college courses currently offering such alternative assessment is limited.

### **Developmentally Correct Assessments for Future Middle School Teachers**

Pre-service teachers who are offered multiple ways to demonstrate their understanding of content at the university level, will be more inclined to implement such methods as middle level teachers modeling various concepts which exemplify best practice. Differentiated learning, providing for student choice, establishing a community of learners, and implementing higher level thinking skills are all concepts supported by using alternative assessment strategies (NMSA, 2010). Frequent formative assessment using a variety of assessment tools is at the foundation of differentiation (Hollas, 2005). Formative assessment has a direct link to the instructional practice. The more teaching strategies known and used, the better chance of meeting the needs of the students you are attempting to reach (Hollas, B. 2005). Linking multiple instructional strategies to multiple assessment strategies provides each child with an environment where they can demonstrate their learning in the best possible way.

The specifics of how one professor implemented a model for multiple assessments is offered through a discussion of the

concepts, assumptions made, peer evaluations, sharing of assessments and other procedures used in a college level teacher preparation course for pre-service middle level teachers.

### **Examining Assessment in Middle Level Teacher Preparation**

Employing an assessment program causing pre-service teachers to reflect on learning, interact with his/her peers, and think on a higher plane is a powerful assessment design for future middle level teachers to experience. Too often, an exam featuring a preponderance of multiple choice and short answer questions focuses the majority of the assessment on the ability to recall information rather than requiring students to create, apply, evaluate or problem solve. Self-selected alternative assessments can lead to detailed open-ended responses allowing learning at a deeper level of thinking and understanding.

### **The Definition, Assumptions and Conceptual Basis for Alternative Assessments**

#### *Alternative Assessment Definition*

The working definition for alternative assessments is assessment types other than those found in the typical college preparatory courses as mid-terms, finals, and papers. Alternative assessments can include such things as: letters to editor, position papers, videos, art work, collages, brochures, concept webs, vocabulary, power points, songs, outlines, summaries, videos and other creative kinds of projects.

The alternative assessments, like more traditional assessments, must have a goal, must be connected to some standard of learning, and be able to be evaluated at different levels (Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, & Muhomba, 2009). Allowing college students to choose from a menu of alternative ways to present their knowledge, gives the pre-service teachers the empowerment to prove their understanding and depth of knowledge in multiple ways. Thus the definition used here for alternative assessment, is to provide students with multiple ways to demonstrate knowledge and understanding beyond the traditional assessment techniques of quizzes, mid-terms, finals, and a paper or project.

#### *Assumptions about Alternative Assessment*

Alternative assessment in teacher preparation courses can be used to extend learning through the assessment period and assessment, assess the amount of learning which has occurred, determine which instructional strategies are being successful, make instruction and assessment adjustments as needed, give appropriate feedback and to model assessment choices for future middle level teachers. The following assumptions are made regarding assessment:

**Assumption 1:** Alternative assessments are varied learning activities which go beyond traditional assessments. (McTighe & Ferrara, *n.d.*; Santrock, 2009).

**Assumption 2:** Student learning and engagement is increased through student choice when confronted with challenging and differentiated assessment tasks. (NMSA, 2010).

**Assumption 3:** Use formative assessments to guide best practice instructional methods (Sternberg & Williams, 2010).

**Assumption 4:** Promote higher level thinking and real life learning through assessment (Sternberg & et. al. 2010; Maryland State Department of Education, *n.d.*; Paul & Elder 2007).

**Assumption 5:** Create equitable assessment opportunities by empowering students to demonstrate their best learning strategies (NMSA, 2010).

**Assumption 6:** Providing descriptive feedback to students regarding their understanding of content will increase learning (Garrison, Chandler, & Ehringhaus, 2009. Shurr 1992).

**Assumption 7:** Overuse of one assessment type does not differentiate for students (Shurr, 1992).

By providing college students with a menu of assessments, allowing self selection of assessments and using peer evaluation, the college assessment program can offer a model for middle level student assessment. Providing learning and assessment opportunities that match specific "best practice" psychological principles can be applied to the college classroom. Learner centered instructional strategies, such as cognitive and meta-cognitive factors, motivational factors, social factors, and individual differences in the way students learn can be applied to assessment

#### *The Process of Alternative Assessment and Evaluation*

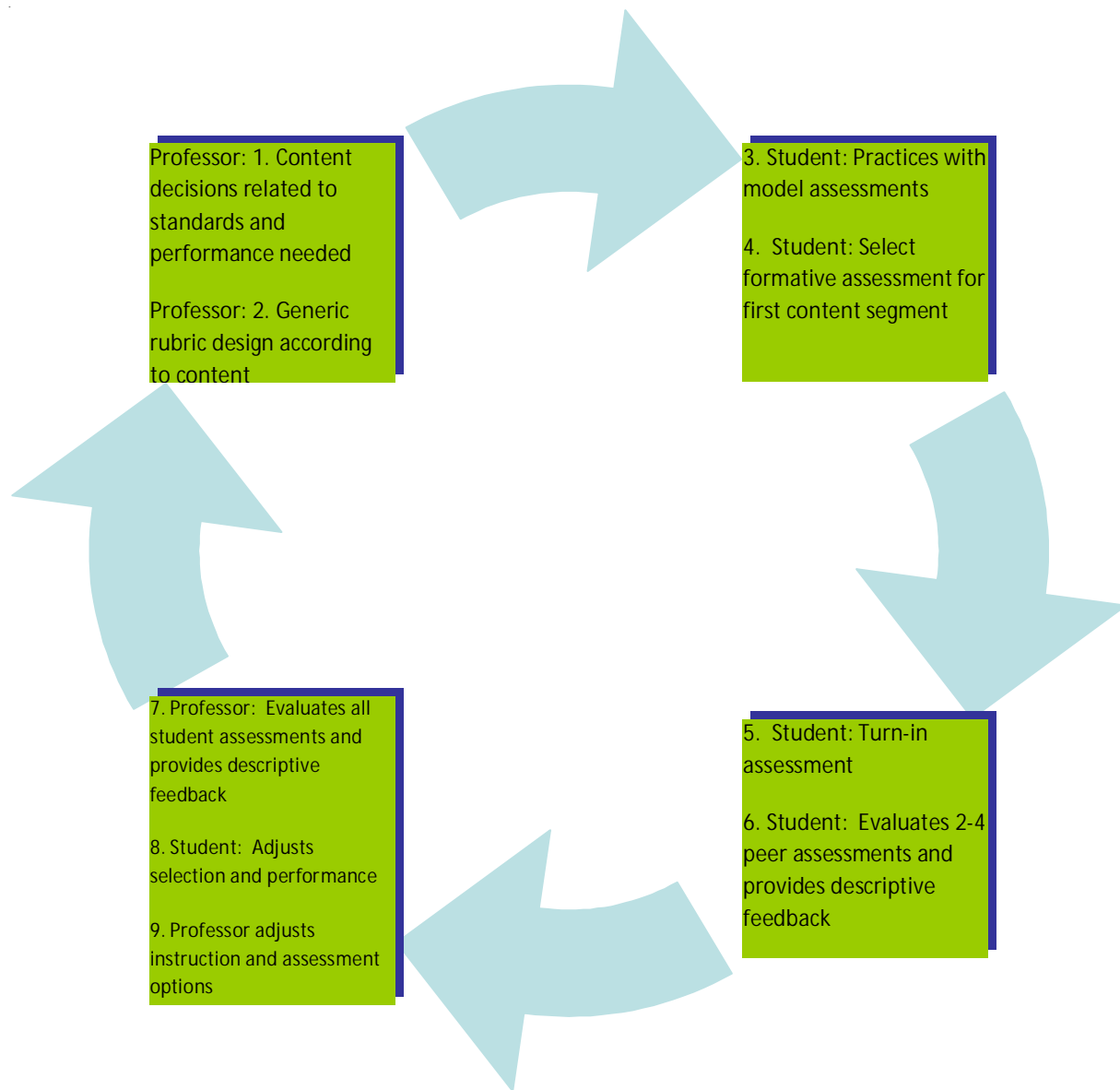
The overall goal for creating alternative assessments is to "...implement educational practices that are responsive to the needs of young adolescents, and implement... [these practices]...comprehensively..." (Smith, T.W. and McEwin, C.K., 2010, p. 391). Creating formative assessments to replace traditional testing will guide student learning as well as help the professor determine what assessment types match best with the topics being discussed and learned in class.

The actual process begins with the analysis of what is to be learned, the standards and skills that need to be demonstrated or performed, and how that might best be achieved for each section of learning through a variety of assessment tools. Creating the assessments to match the learning occurs next. To establish the correct assessments requires determining the skills and understanding needed for the block of learning that is being conducted. What are the big concepts, what are the overall questions to be answered and what is needed to help the students understand the information. ( Poham, 2008, page 47). A rubric is designed to evaluate the student assessments such that the quality, quantity and rigor of the content can be evaluated. Pre-service teachers practice evaluating assessments using model papers. After evaluating practice on rubrics, pre-service teachers begin studying a unit of content. Now each pre-service teacher is empowered to select the method which best fits her/his style of learning to demonstrate the understanding of the first and subsequent learning units. Each week a new formative assessment is conducted with the students handing in their assessment at the beginning of class which is then randomly passed out among other students for a blind review and evaluation by peers. (Title pages and reviews are attached to

the paper face down on the back of the paper rather than the traditional title page on the front). After reviewing each assessment, students are required to give descriptive feedback, evaluating between two and four assessments each class period. When peer evaluators are finished, papers are collected for another

blind review and descriptive feedback by the professor. Papers are returned to the students the next class with multiple descriptive feedback from peers and then professor. Built into the assessment procedure is the automatic repetitive learning sequence for each assessment. The visual model will look like this:

**Figure 1**



One of the main goals of alternative assessment is to provide for higher level thinking in the form of transfer, the ability to apply knowledge to new contexts through application. Each assessment has an application portion to it such that the emphasis is application rather than recall (Brookhart, S.M., 2010). The focus thus becomes for students to analyze, evaluate and create in the varied assessments as opposed to recall and remember specific content. Clearly the intent is to create higher order thinking in the form of transfer, critical thinking and problem solving. Here are some ideas which might help in developing assessment tasks:

- Compare and contrast... (Theories, concepts, applications in different settings)
- Evaluate according to the usefulness... (Web sites, lists, texts...)
- Create multiple solutions to the problem...
- Develop a program which will increase...
- Prioritize the list of ideas according to ....
- “Create a cartoon, graphic, data table or chart...” (Brookhart, 2010, p. 147).

The higher level thinking should be carried through to the evaluation process when creating the rubric for students to use. As Brookhart (2010) expresses “... a common rubric format for written projects in many subjects assesses [1] content completeness and accuracy, [2] organization/communication, and [3] writing conventions...” (Brookhart, 2010, p. 24).

### **Cognitive Principles**

Offering college students a menu of assessments matched with a simple peer evaluation at the beginning of each class can apply the following Learner-Centered Psychological Principles:

**Principle 1:** Construction of Knowledge: “...learners link new information with previous knowledge” (Work Group of the American Psychological Association Board of Educational Affairs (APABEA) as cited in Sternberg & Williams, 2010, pp. 452- 453)

When evaluating peers assessments the student evaluator makes connections between what they have provided as evidence of their own learning to what their peers have submitted. Natural connections between different aspects of the assigned learning are made by the variation of the assessment styles and the accompanying applications being submitted for evaluation by their peers. Application of the content is multiplied several times via professor instruction and examples, the student’s own assessment, and the evaluating two or more peer assessments. This leads to what is known as automatizing well learned skills through repeated reading and evaluation of peer assessments in addition to class discussion, activities, and direct instruction. (Paulis, C. *n.d.*; Sternberg, et. al. 2010).

**Principle 2:** Strategic thinking: “... learners create a repertoire of thinking and reasoning strategies...” (APABEA cited in Steinberg et. al., 2010, pp. 452-453).

As the peer evaluators assess each others’ work, they are given an opportunity to expand their thinking through one of the highest levels of thinking skills, evaluation. (Sternberg et. al. 2010) Not only do peer evaluators have to process what their classmates have provided as evidence of learning, the peer evaluators have to determine whether the evidence is worthy and significant. Thus additional reinforcement of unit learning through the peer evaluation process happens in various assessment styles and at a higher thinking level.

Beyond the evaluation portion of the assessment students were able to enhance their own repertoire of learning and assessment strategies. For example, a peer reviewer may evaluate a brochure, summary, and a letter to the editor all based around a single content area. Natural comparisons by peer evaluators are made to their own assessment submissions. These natural comparisons are made by seeing how different students interpreted the content and assessment strategies. These self-analyses lead to improvements in individual quality over the course of the semester.

When providing evaluation feedback to their classmates, peer evaluators providing that feedback inadvertently become peer tutors. The tutoring that occurs through the feedback portion of the evaluation can range from simplistic things such as grammar and spelling to much more complex tutoring of realistic applications of the concepts discussed using descriptive feedback (Snowman, McCown, & Biehler, 2009).

### **Motivational and Instructional Factors and the Peer Review Process**

**Principle 1:** Intrinsic motivation to learn: “The learner’s creativity, higher-order thinking, and natural curiosity all contribute to motivation to learn. Intrinsic motivation is stimulated by tasks of optimal novelty and difficulty, relevant to personal interests and providing for personal choice and control.” (APABEA cited in Steinberg et. al., 2010, pp. 452-453).

Learners in the college class come from a wide variety of specialties in their individual content fields. Given the opportunity, this diverse group of college students is motivated to create a display of their own knowledge of learning in a way that may be common to their specific field. Often, this leads to natural cross-curricular connections. The art students, social studies and the math majors choose to demonstrate their knowledge in different formats. Similar connections are made within content area when students read their peers assessments, done in a style that matches their individual talent and knowledge base.

The alternative assessments match discovery learning and cognitive learning theories. Students completing different assessments must make numerous decisions regarding selecting the most important information in the learning unit, organizing that information, and connecting the information



to things they know or learned previously and apply it to their future careers.

### **Developmental and Social Factors**

**Principle 1:** Developmental and Social Factors: "...Learning is most effective when development within and across physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional domains is taken into account." (APABEA cited in Steinberg et. al., 2010, pp. 452-453). If the learning that is assessed is basically memorization and recall, the students will enhance those skills over others. (Paul & Elder, 2007). The real tasks of the future will not likely be related to memorization and recall skills as technology makes accessibility to information easier. Tasks of the future will take creativity, reflection, application and problem solving skills by our students. Students will need to work in groups, problem solve, and create their own solutions and representations of their knowledge.

**Principle 2:** Social Influence on learning: "Learning is influenced by social interactions, interpersonal relations, and communication with others" (APABEA cited in Steinberg et. al., 2010, pp. 452-453).

Most teachers will agree the best way to learn new information is by teaching the material. Learning new information is accomplished by professors and teachers through a multi-layered approach which includes learning the material, preparation of the new material for presentation, assessing how much learning has occurred and giving feedback to their students regarding the assessments. The evaluation of multiple exams or assessments by teachers and professors causes the content to be ingrained in the instructors' rather than their students' minds. Peer evaluation focuses the learning back on the students much like it does for professors and teachers. Instead of professors having their learning reinforced by what students have produced, now pre-service teachers have their learning reinforced by evaluating two to four assessments completed by their peers. Although the content is the same, typically the peers format and focus their assessments differently from their peer evaluators. Thus, the peer evaluation process adds an additional learning layer for students. Unlike traditional mid-terms and finals, the learning process continues after the assessment is completed avoiding the learning stopping point which for many students is at the time of grade notification in traditional assessment procedures.

### **Individual Difference Factors**

**Principle 1:** Individual differences in learning: "Learners have different strategies, approaches, and capabilities for learning that are a function of prior experience and heredity" (APABEA cited in Steinberg et. al., 2010, pp. 452-453).

The key to providing success among students whether it is middle school or college level students is to give students the opportunity to show their strengths. Student choice in assessment empowers the individual while demonstrating their individual learning style. Alternative assessment is particularly

successful for those students who have less success in the more traditional formative assessments.

The alternative assessment and peer evaluation process used here could be called guided discovery assessment similar to guided discovery learning (Chen & Hononmichl, 2008). Like the questions for guided discovery learning, the first nine assessment alternatives for learning units or chapters are preselected options for students. The three or four alternative assessments for each chapter or learning unit are aligned to make students focus on specific content found in the chapters or sections being assessed while introducing the students to new assessment types.

### **Designing an Alternative Assessment Program for a College Class**

Designing alternative assessments can begin by answering a few questions. What body of knowledge must the students have when they are finished? What should they be able to do with that knowledge? What are the real life connections or the tasks in the future for the students learning from the course? How do you get students engaged in the learning process and make the assessment a continuation of the learning? In the examples that follow, one college course, Education Psychology was chosen to see if alternative assessment could be used successfully. The goal was to have students read the assigned materials, discuss and reflect on materials at higher levels of thinking and apply their learning to future teaching practice.

### **Scaffolding and Selecting the Appropriate Number of Assessments**

Structuring the assessment choices for students at the beginning of the semester follows the principles of guided discovery by scaffolding assessment types. Allowing students complete control of assessment selection at the beginning of the semester may not produce quality examples of learning. (Eggen & Kauchek, 2010). Instead scaffold assessment types by pre-selecting three or four assessment types which best match the unit of learning, using this procedure for the first seven to nine weeks. Gradually introduce students to different assessment types as the semester progresses. The limited pre-selected choices over the first seven to nine assessments will allow students to try different ways and establish their own best learning styles through assessment.

The number of assessments offered per learning unit has an impact on the evaluation process. Offering more than four assessment types per learning unit causes difficulty in the evaluation process. Offering less than three assessment types per learning unit, students will not be able to select one that matches their individual learning style. After the pre-service teachers have selected from professor assigned options, provide the students an opportunity to create their own assessments or repeat successful assessment types they

learned during the early portion of the semester. This provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate assessment types not previously seen, create a new demonstration of learning by adding their own assessment type and for some students increased confidence as successful assessment types are repeated. Assessment offerings are increased from the list established by the professor to all the possible assessments thirty pre-service teachers can create or have experienced in the past. This expands the knowledge base regarding assessment types among all students as well as the professor.

### Developing the Evaluation Portion of the Assessments

Developing the rubric should be a class activity guided by the professor. Questions which will stimulate understanding of the rubric include: What is the purpose for the evaluation? What makes a quality project? How do you know when your peers understand the content? What is the difference between an exemplary project and acceptable project? How do you tell when someone has not read the required material or does not adequately understand the material? How does one give appropriate constructive feedback on projects and what is the impact on the writer? What will be evaluated in the project? A model using a former assessment can be used to assess the process.

### Things to Be Considered in Evaluation Procedures

Conversations with students using a model assessment can provide energized discussion as to the merits of a project. Another set of questions can be centered on giving helpful feedback to peers. How does one provide feedback? Using an assessment from a former unit or chapter, ask some questions such as: What are the particular strengths of this project? What needs to be changed to move to the next level? What section caught your attention? How will grammar and spelling errors be handled? Will you give feedback at the point of error or in general feedback comments at the end of the assessment?

### Setting High Expectations

By using exemplary and non-exemplary models from previous classes, the establishment of high expectations for quality will be developed and inter-rater can be improved through practice. Reliability can also be enhanced by giving each peer reviewer more assessments to evaluate earlier in the semester, and then gradually reducing the number as they become more confident in their evaluation skills. Critical to the inter-rater reliability process is to make sure students are blindly scoring the assessments using a consistent and practiced rubric across all assessments. To further advance fair and consistent evaluation is for the professor to evaluate blindly as did the peer assessors and then check his/her evaluation against those made by student evaluators. A sample rubric is provided here:

Figure 2

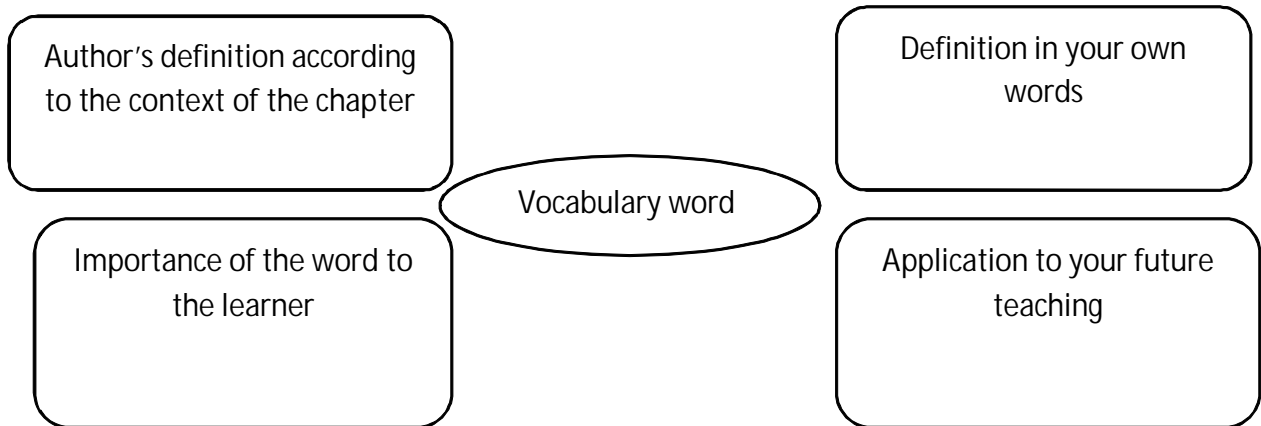
Education Psychology, Student Name:	Level 4: 100% 100% Exceeds content requirements: extensive and accurate; highly effective demonstration of knowledge; thorough and complete understanding; content is organized understandable fashion; punctuation, neatness, grammar, and spelling are nearly flawless; appearance is exemplary	Level 3.5: 87.5% Meets content requirements: accuracy and coverage; Moderately effective demonstration of knowledge and understanding; adequate appearance; punctuation, spelling, and grammar with few mistakes; appearance is excellent	Level 3.0: 75% Meets some content requirements in accuracy and coverage; minimally effective demonstration of knowledge and understanding; mistakes in grammar and punctuation; appearance has a few flaws	Level 2.5: 62.5% Attempt to meet the content requirements in accuracy and coverage; little effective demonstration of knowledge and understanding; punctuation and grammar mistakes negatively effects the overall product; appearance detracts from product	Feedback summary (Reasons for the evaluation):
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### Sample Alternative Assessments

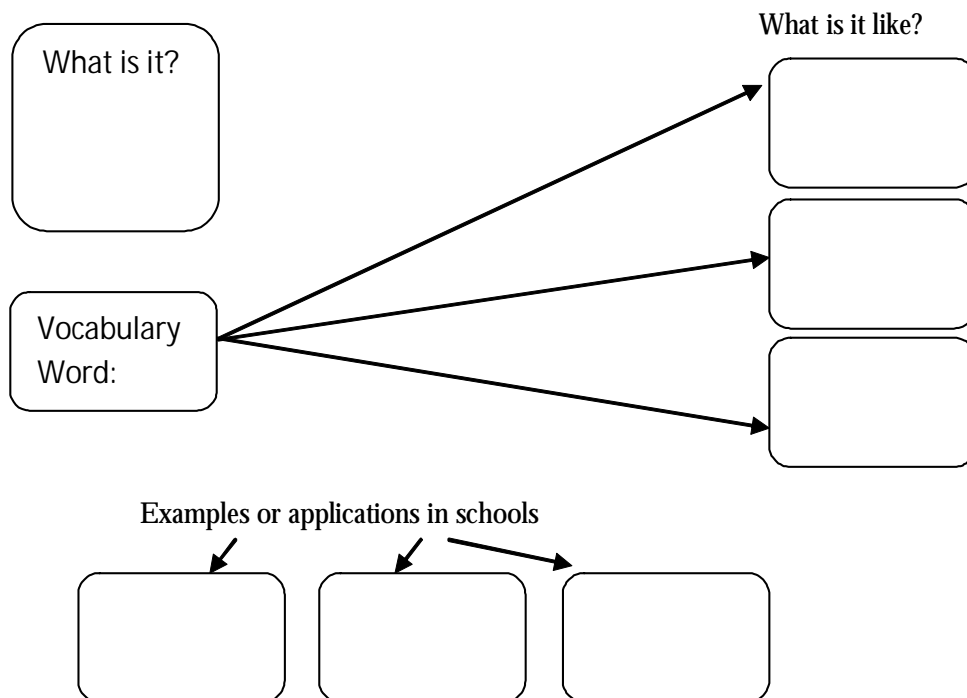
Although these assessments were designed specifically for an Education Psychology course, alternative assessment design could be used in virtually any education class. Other foundations courses in education, such as Social Foundations of Middle Level, elements of instruction and methods courses lend themselves easily to alternative assessments. A longer version of the sample assessments included here was used for an Education Psychology:

#### Vocabulary development

- A. Development of vocabulary cards: Use the sample vocabulary card format as a model for discussing the key terms in this chapter (minimum of ten terms)

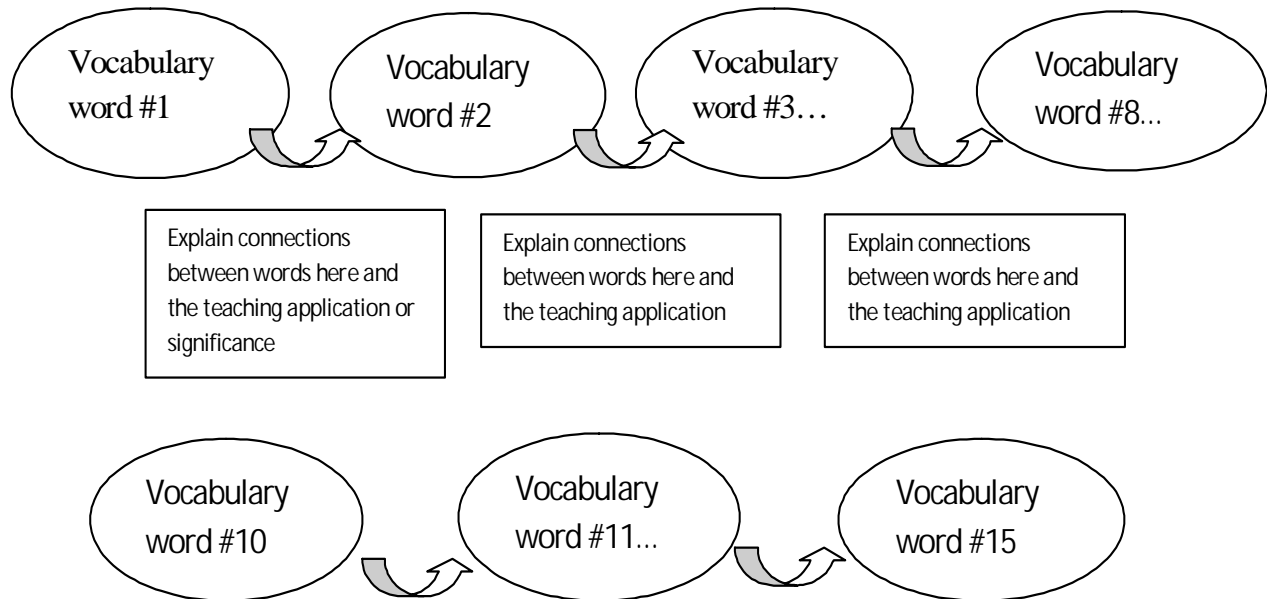


- B. Journal writing vocabulary development: Examine the key terms in this chapter. Write a sentence or two explaining in your own words what each term means, how it is connected to other portions of the reading, and its application to your future classroom (minimum of ten words).
- C. Use a graphic organizer to create a word map for each vocabulary word. Adapt the word map to add more examples as needed (minimum of ten words).



(Spencer & Guillaume, 2009. Adapted from *35 strategies for developing content area vocabulary*, page 11.)

Develop a word chain for the vocabulary words in this chapter. You must justify the words linkage and explain the connections you made between each term. Include in your explanation how each term is applied in the classroom or its significance (minimum requirement of ten words).



(Spencer & Guillaume, 2009. Adapted from *35 strategies for developing content area vocabulary*, page 11.)

### Summarizing Strategies

- D. Summarize the key components of this chapter. Use the textbook chapter subheadings to divide the summary. Provide an application statement to your future teaching for each major summary subheading.
- E. Examine the literature on character education. Develop teacher resources and a 2-3 page plan of how such a program might be implemented in your school including such things as reduced “cheating” and commitment to community.
- F. Examine Gardner’s multiple intelligences and make a list of activities which includes all intelligences identified in this theory for each subject you will teach.
- G. Create specific activities which will promote sociocultural diversity in your classroom or school..
- H. Create a teacher friendly brochure which will specify ways teachers can reduce bias against a specific subgroup of students based on gender, ethnicity, religion, learning or physical disabilities or race.

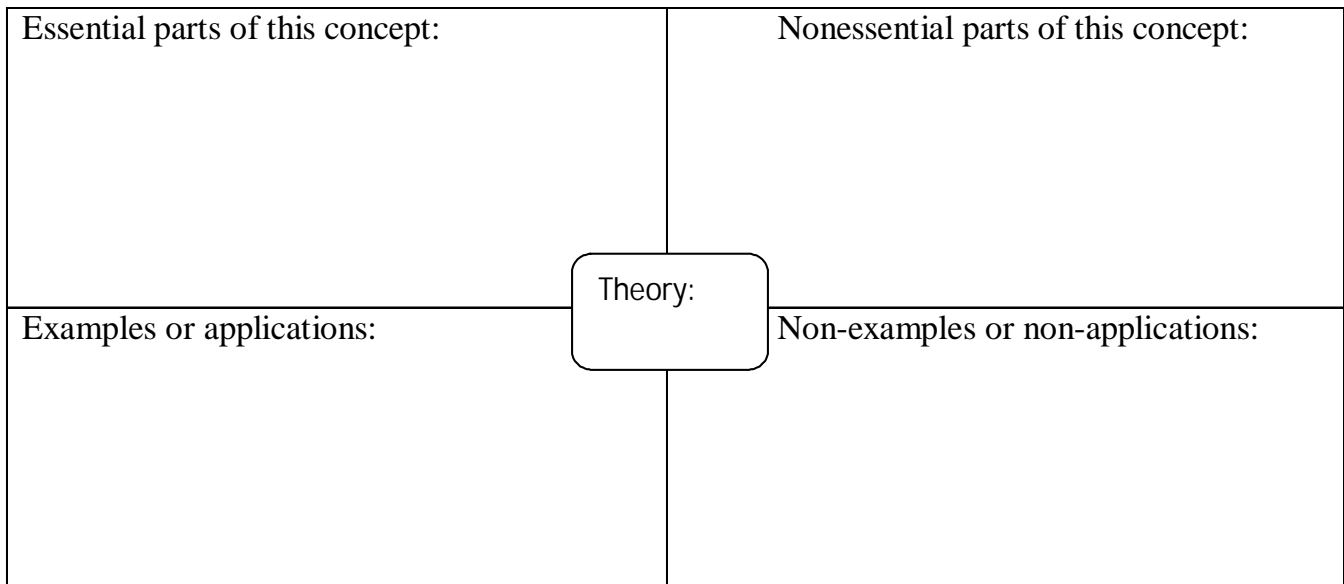
### Applications and Best Practices

- I. Make a practical and easy to use tip list identifying “best teaching practices” according to theorists discussed in

this chapter. Identify the theorist, and then specify specific teaching tips based on that theorist’s work.

- J. Make a teaching strategy tip list based on parenting research and modeling. Research parenting styles such as co-parenting and explain how this may apply to teaching styles and working as a team member in a school.
- K. Your author makes a specific point of encouraging Latinas and Latinos progress: Develop a specific plan that will encourage social and intellectual growth for this subgroup of students. Plan detailed activities and indicate how it can be adapted to other subgroups of students in your class.
- L. Examine the list of strategies for the home-school-family-community linkages. Develop a plan of useful strategies which might be used at the level you plan to teach plus either one level above or below.
- M. Choose either of these two activities from “Taking It to the Net”. Evaluate the web the usefulness for teachers and indicate how a teacher might apply the web site information to the teaching practice.
- N. Use the Frayer model to develop comparisons among the theories presented in this chapter. Modify the format below to suit your needs for this assignment:





(Spencer & Guillaume, 2009. Adapted from *35 strategies for developing content area vocabulary*. Boston, Pearson. p. 19). (The assessment tasks listed are simplified versions of assessments.) Other assessment choices that may meet the needs of different college courses include: essays; story-play; poem; art project (collage or other works); video tape/audiotape; spreadsheet; survey; debate; interview; learning logs; letter to the author and review of journal articles (McTighe, J. & Ferrara, S., unknown; Schurr, 1992; Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991).

**Reflections on the Traditional Assessment Model**

Changing the classroom assessment climate in the college classroom is overdue. Providing only one model where students listen to the professor’s lecture, study, memorize and give back the information on exams does not match the real life environment for which middle level teachers will operate. Limited retention often accompanies the learning which occurs in a traditional formative assessment. Processing of the information is often not connected to previously learned material and the application is often limited to the items which were asked in extended response or essay questions. Traditional assessments are too often not differentiated for the individual learner, often leading to low creativity and low intrinsic rewards and unmotivated learning on the part of the students.

**Advantages of Alternative Assessment Model and Peer Evaluation**

Alternative assessment offers a number of advantages for the preparation of middle level pre-service teachers. Increased motivation and differentiation in assessment is provided for students as they select the “best way” to demonstrate their knowledge of content. Through self selection of the assessment type, motivation to learn is increased through empowerment. Through application and interpretation of assigned reading material, students are forced to read and learn the material in-depth. Higher level thinking skills are enhanced as students are required to provide evidence of their own learning and to “evaluate” their peers’ demonstration of learning. Thinking skills are enhanced beyond memorization and recall to application and interpretation of content.

Alternative assessment fosters a community of learning through the sharing of assessments via the peer evaluation system.

Peer tutoring and reciprocal teaching occur automatically when feedback is given on specific projects or assessments. New and varied assessment types expands student understanding of alternative assessment while learning content for a college course. Peer evaluators using the same rubric understand what composes a quality assessment submission. Successful assessment types can become integrated into the assessment program for subsequent courses, while less successful assessment types can be dropped.

There is significant reduction in assessment anxiety. Pre-service teachers’ confidence increases when choosing their own form of evaluation from a menu of alternatives. Variety, the number of assessments, and the “out of class” preparation all lead to reduced anxiety and increased differentiation. (Eggen, & Kauchek, 2010).

Conducting peer evaluation indirectly forces self-evaluation as the peer evaluator compares their own personal work to their peers’ assessments. Thus as the semester progresses, alterations leading to improved quality and content in pre-service teachers personal assessments occur naturally. A combination of evaluating practice and receiving peer feedback initiates slow steady improvement in the assessments submitted by students.

Descriptive feedback is given multiple times to students. Informal feedback by reviewing peers’ work causes self analysis, while formal feedback from their peers and the professor gives them specific descriptive feedback. The generic rubric used for all assessments provides a guide for expectations as well as indicators of levels of performance. The feedback completes the learning cycle where students read and learn independently, learn from in-class activities, make choices about how to present their learning, evaluate other peers’ assessments and then gain the

feedback from others. Feedback causes students to adjust their learning styles by either repeating assessment types or eliminating certain assessment types. The learning cycle begins again.

### Research Agenda

Informal feedback regarding alternative assessment from the classes using alternative assessment thus far has been similar. Students have expressed much less anxiety in the assessment process. The empowerment provided by self-selecting the assessment type demonstrating learning has been valued by the students. Initially peer review was resisted till a system for blind reviews was installed which eliminated most of the discomfort related to the evaluation of peers. Allen & Flippo, (2002) found similar results in a survey conducted with regard to alternative assessment with regard to attitudes and concerns in literacy education courses. The informal observations and feedback call for research to verify student attitudes of empowerment, content rigor, levels of test anxiety, commitment to learning and inter-rater reliability.

### Summary

Conducting alternative assessments in combination with peer evaluations allows for creativity, higher level thinking through evaluation and application of learning, and practice of some of the best learning strategies. Providing students with methods for assessing vocabulary development, summarizing strategies, incorporating writing, and concept mapping all contribute to increased learning. Engagement in the learning process is increased as students choose their own assignments and model new assessment types that they have evaluated. Students think deeply and richly about each unit week after week through formative alternate assessments rather than periodic times during the semester as is required by standard mid-term and final summative assessments. The peer evaluation system allows for repetition of content discussed in class learning. Alternative assessment in the college classroom is an appropriate assessment model for pre-service teachers giving the future middle level teachers practical experience in developmentally correct assessment (NMSA, 2010) while improving their own learning.

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