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Practice to Theory: Making Connections Between Assessment and Evaluation Through a Reflective Practice Assignment in the Bachelor of Education Program

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Abstract

In self-study, researchers explicitly identify how their practices add to the body of knowledge in teacher education (Vanassche & Kelchtemans, 2015). This self-study aims to document and analyze some of my learning as an early career teacher educator in Ontario, Canada. Being cognizant of the well-researched theory-to-practice gap in teacher education and the potential for someone with recent field experience to readily share "tips and tricks" without deeply connecting to theoretical perspectives (Hibbert et al., 2022), I document and analyze my experiences shifting the structure of a Bachelor of Education course assignment. The purpose of the shift is to help support teacher candidates in drawing connections between their assessment practices on placement and assessment theory and policy. Through this reflective essay, I share my instructional decisions, how I enacted them, and reflect forward. Because teacher candidates demonstrated clear connections about how their assessment decisions aligned with theory, policy, and curriculum documents, I believe this assignment was a successful addition to the course

Dans l'auto-étude, les chercheurs identifient explicitement la manière dont leurs pratiques contribuent à l'ensemble des connaissances dans le domaine de la formation des enseignants et des enseignantes (Vanassche & Kelchtemans, 2015). Cette auto-étude vise à documenter et à analyser certains de mes apprentissages en tant que formatrice d'enseignants en début de carrière en Ontario, au Canada. Consciente de l'écart entre la théorie et la pratique dans la formation des enseignants et des enseignantes, qui a fait l'objet de nombreuses recherches, et du risque qu'une personne ayant une expérience récente sur le terrain partage volontiers des « trucs et astuces » sans s'intéresser de près aux perspectives théoriques (Hibbert et al., 2022), je documente et analyse mes expériences en modifiant la structure d'un devoir de cours de baccalauréat en éducation. L'objectif de ce changement est d'aider les étudiants et les étudiantes en enseignement à établir des liens entre leurs pratiques d'évaluation en stage et la théorie et la politique d'évaluation. Dans cet essai réflexif, je fais part de mes décisions pédagogiques, de la manière dont je les ai mises en œuvre et je réfléchis à l'avenir. Parce que les candidats et les candidates à l'enseignement ont démontré des liens clairs sur la façon dont leurs décisions d'évaluation s'alignent sur la théorie, la politique et les documents du programme, je pense que ce travail a été un ajout fructueux au cours..

Purpose

This self-study aims to document and analyze some of my learning as an early career teacher educator. As someone relatively new to the field of teacher education, I am cognizant that my twenty years of lived experiences as an elementary school teacher can unconsciously bias my lessons at the university (Russell et al., 2020). This particular bias can sometimes result in lessons heavily anchored in craft knowledge, also known as the wisdom of practice. Craft knowledge is "the wealth of teaching information that very skilled practitioners have about their practice" (Leinhardt, 1990, p. 18) and can result in an overemphasis on my classroom experiences rather than a clear articulation of the theoretical underpinnings of the research in teacher education (Russell et al., 2020). I am cognizant of the potential for someone with recent field experience to readily share "tips and tricks" without deeply connecting to theoretical perspectives (Hibbert et al., 2022). As such, I constantly reflect on my lessons, assignments, and communication with teacher candidates. I ask myself:

- Is what I am doing/saying/modeling building better teachers?
- Is what I am doing/saying/modeling what pre-service teachers need to enter the profession successfully?
- How can I improve what I am doing?
- Where does what I am doing/saying/modeling fit into the research?
- How do I draw connections between what I am doing/saying/modeling in the university classroom so teacher candidates are better equipped for field placement and the career?
- What have I not considered before? What areas of the literature have I not explored? What other perspectives are not considered or incorporated into my materials?

In self-study, researchers make explicit their practice and outline how it adds to the body of research on teacher education (Vanassche & Kelchtemans, 2015). Therefore, this essay will document and analyze my experiences in shifting the structure of an assignment in a Bachelor of Education course at an Ontario Faculty of Education. This analysis will provide further insight into my practice and offer a point of reflection for myself and my colleagues.

Background

In teacher education, teacher candidates enter programs with lived experiences as students (Lortie, 1975). Dubbed the apprenticeship of observation, Lortie (1975) indicates that teacher candidates enter Bachelor of Education programs with biases (both conscious and unconscious) that are influenced by their positionality. One's positionality is the social and political context that contributes to identity and is influenced by one's standing in a specific moment (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It is a pre-service teacher candidate's positionality that would impact their biases. A teacher candidate's epistemology and ontology integrate to form their values, attitudes, beliefs, and professional practice (Jordan et al., 2009). A longstanding goal in teacher education programs is to balance theoretical knowledge and practical learning while helping teacher candidates see the connection between the two; one's positionality impacts one's ability to make connections between theory and practice (Korthagen, 2010; McGarr et al., 2017).

The challenge of creating teacher education programs that adequately marry theory and practice has been well-researched and a topic of ongoing discussion (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Russell et al., 2020; Korthagen, 2010). Research indicates that pre-service teachers who do not have a potent blend of theory and practice are more likely to struggle once they enter the procession (Darling-Hammond, 2000). However, many teacher candidates indicate that most of their learning occurs during field placements (Wenzel et al., 2018). In a recent field placement visit, one associate teacher (who had been practicing as a primary teacher for over a decade) indicated that she didn't learn "a thing" during her time at the university. She further commented that all of her learning was done on field placement. I was able to reconcile the fallacy in this educator's perception. While one learns a lot in university during teacher education, placement is a space where teacher candidates make tremendous growth. Nonetheless, I pondered the question: if educators in the field are perpetuating these conceptions, how can I shift this conversation so current teacher candidates can better see how our work at the university informs and guides their classroom teaching?

Frequently, field experience placement feels disconnected from university coursework; teacher candidates complete nine-week blocks at the university, followed by field placements in schools (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Zeichner, 2010). A liaison from the university checks in throughout the placement, yet I perceive the two as disconnected. The impetus of drawing connections between course learning and field placement is primarily left to the individual teacher candidate. This suggests that bridging the theory-practice gap may require a more recursive approach, with teacher candidates returning artifacts from their field experience to the university for analysis.

Opportunities to bridge the theory-practice gap would resolve some challenges, including seeking opportunities for "modeling, role-play, dramatization, and case studies" within the context of teacher education programs (Goodnough et al., 2017, p. 124). Further, research indicates that reflective practice opportunities can bridge theory and practice (Anand & Gangmei, 2023). In this self-study, I seek to analyze if a reflective action research assignment can help teacher candidates understand the connections between placement assessment decisions and assessment theory, thereby narrowing the theory-practice gap.

Self-Study Design

As a sessional instructor, I had the opportunity to teach a spring semester course to semester three (of a four-semester program) teacher candidates in action research and reflective practice. This course occurs immediately after their second field placement in Ontario schools (grade ranges from Kindergarten through Grade 12). I had taught this course in the previous spring, so I had an opportunity to reflect on my first experience with the course. I wanted to consider carefully how I taught, assessed, and evaluated my students in this synchronous virtual learning environment.

As per the university program guidelines, the course learning objectives were:

1. Explore theories, views, and perspectives regarding reflective professional practice and action research in education.
2. Connect relevant theories, views, and perspectives to their professional practices to develop a deeper and more personalized understanding of their work as educators.
3. Engage in personal and collaborative reflective processes through readings, inquiry activities, multimedia presentations, dialogue, discussions, and debate.

Considering the course objectives outlined above, it felt critical to highlight reflective practice specifically in one assignment. As a sessional instructor, I had noticed that the understanding of assessment and the assessment loop was an area of growth for teacher candidates. As such, I made the pedagogical decisions to include an assignment requiring teacher candidates to think critically about an assessment tool they had used on their second placement.

In the province of Ontario, the *Growing Success* document outlines the assessment and evaluation policies for students in Kindergarten through Grade 12 (Ontario, 2010). The assessment loop describes the recursive process of gathering and interpreting information to glean students' understanding of the content presented in the provincial curriculum. The role of assessment is to improve student outcomes by providing information to drive learning forward (assessment *for* learning, assessment *as* learning) or to evaluate achievement against the curriculum using the achievement chart (assessment *of* learning). Assessment *for* learning takes place formatively; teachers gather formative assessment data to inform the learning process. Examples of this include exit tickets and diagnostic assessment tools. The purpose of assessment *for* learning is to inform instruction. Assessment *as* learning generally provides opportunities for self and peer assessment, fostering metacognition and reflection in the learning process. Assessment *of* learning is our summative assessment or culminating task, which closes the assessment loop and measures outcomes against criteria and/or curriculum.

In the winter semester (semester two), I have students create a culminating task and an aligned assessment tool (assessment *of* learning). Each year, I observed that despite substantial scaffolding, submissions lacked depth. My anecdotal observation is mirrored in the *Transition to Teaching* report, which indicates that beginning teachers in the province of Ontario indicated a desired area of growth for professional learning with both assessment and evaluation (Ontario College of Teachers, 2021). Further, research suggests that formative assessment (assessment *for* learning, assessment *as* learning) and anecdotal observation, in particular, are areas of growth for educators (Ezeimwenghian Julian & Enowoghomwenma, 2021; Black & William, 1998).

Darling-Hammond (2006) indicates that beginning teachers who engage in reflective practices are likelier to demonstrate self-efficacy, a skill known to help beginning teachers successfully transition into the profession. Additionally, reflective practice increases educator self-awareness and builds one's capacity to provide responsive instruction. Given this data and the rising trends in teacher attrition in Ontario, building teacher candidate self-efficacy in assessment and evaluation is prudent for instructors within the faculty of education (Ontario College of Teachers, 2021). My goal for the resulting assignment arose from these revelations; I wanted teacher candidates to build a strong understanding of reflective practice and how it contributes to the daily actions of classroom teachers.

In the creation of this assignment, my goals were three-fold. I wanted the assignment to:

1. Target the theory-to-practice connection by flipping it - I would have teacher candidates investigate the practice-to-theory connection.
2. Focus on teacher candidates' understanding of assessment and the assessment loop.
3. Have teacher candidates deeply reflect on their assessment practices on the recent field placement.

Therefore, when crafting the student assignment description, the purpose of the assignment was indicated as follows:

> Examining and assessing student work, as well as our assessment tools, allow educators to learn about what students can do and what they think. As educators, reflecting on our practices allows us to acknowledge our fears, better understand our strengths and weaknesses, and identify areas of improvement (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Pre-service teachers who demonstrate advanced reflective practice regarding their fieldwork experiences have an increased creative potential and are more likely to honestly confront misconceptions (Catalana, 2020).

Semester three occurs immediately after a five-week field placement, so I leveraged recently created assessment tools for the assignment. I hypothesized that the recency of this experience would allow teacher candidates to recall the insights gleaned through their use of the assessment tool and to plan forward for the tool's potential future use. The course assignment was introduced during the first week of class, with the due date for the assignment being one week later (week two of the nine-week course).

There was significant variance in the placement experiences of teacher candidates, necessitating open parameters for the task. In the assignment description, it was indicated that teacher candidates could choose any type of assessment tool (a conversation, an observation, or a product) used at any point during their field placement (meaning they could potentially choose an assessment *for* learning, an assessment *as* learning, or an assessment *of* learning) (Ontario, 2010). This allowed teacher candidates to self-select the tool they felt best met the assignment criteria. The assignment description indicated:

1. Teacher candidates will choose an assessment that they used on placement. This could be an **assessment *for*, *as*, <u>or</u> *of* learning** but must be generated by the teacher candidate.
2. This assessment tool must be submitted using Google Docs/Slides or Sheets.
3. Using the comment feature, teacher candidates will describe *why* they used the assessment tool and *how* it was implemented in the classroom. Annotations should be made directly onto the assessment tool. Teacher candidates who prefer to self-assess orally may use the <u>Mote extension</u> (or similar) to leave voice notes throughout the assessment tool. The opportunity for oral response was included as an element of Universal Design for Learning by offering multiple means of expression (CAST, 2018).
4. Additionally, teacher candidates will make explicit connections between *Growing Success,* the curriculum, and the achievement chart for their assessment tool. Further, teacher candidates must make explicit connections between assessment theoretical frameworks and their assessment tools.
5. Finally, teacher candidates will self-assess the efficacy of their assessment tool: Was it good? Why or why not? How did it impact practice? How might you use the assessment tool next time? If you would not use it again, why not?
6. When submitting to Canvas (the university's learning management system), teacher candidates should submit a Google link with "Commenter" status so the course instructor can see each annotation.

Through the annotation process, teacher candidates were required to contemplate each assessment aspect. By turning the assignment in with commenter status enabled, I could provide descriptive feedback directly on specific annotations, allowing for misconceptions to be addressed immediately and for successful insights to be celebrated. Further, it provided me with diagnostic data (assessment *for* learning) regarding teacher candidates' experience level with reflective practice. Given the strong emphasis on reflective practice throughout the Bachelor of Education program, I hypothesized that the findings would be confirmatory of students with a strong reflective practice stance.

Qualitative assessment tools generally give teacher candidates a clear idea of what must be demonstrated to show proficiency in the topic; in this instance, a single-point rubric was used to assess submissions (see Figure 1 below). I prefer single-point rubrics as this tool highlights my commitment to success-criteria-driven assessment and allows students to exceed expectations to provide additional evidence of their learning (Wahl, 2023). Research indicates that single-point rubrics make rubric construction more manageable for the evaluator and make it easier for students to interpret the rubric as "the rubric now precisely states what is considered proficient" (Estell, Sapp & Reeping, 2016, p. 1). For my assignment, the evaluation identified teacher candidates' ability to make practice-to-theory connections (i.e., did they connect to *Growing Success* the achievement chart, or educational theory?) and their ability to embody the principles of reflective practice. As indicated in the single-point rubric, meeting the success criteria earned students a grade in the B-range. For students to earn a grade in the A-range, they had to demonstrate going above and beyond expectations as outlined. This could include numerous and thoughtful citations of literature, policy, and curriculum documents; a detailed description of their tool; or superior evidence of reflections on practice.

Figure 1
Single Point Rubric

Using a single-point rubric, the following success criteria will be evaluated:

Needs Development	Success Criteria	Beyond Expectations
	Effectively describes the assessment tool and its context. This includes its place in the assessment loop, position in the unit of study, and purpose of the assessment.	
	Explicitly connects the assessment tool to Ministry documents and assessment policy (Growing Success, the curriculum, the achievement chart, and research on assessment).	
	Communicates the efficacy of the assessment tool as a learning tool for the assessment. For example, would you use this tool again? How did it drive your instruction forward? How might you make changes?	

If a teacher candidate meets all of the success criteria, they will be given a grade in the B-range. Teacher candidates who hope to earn A-level grades must demonstrate an ability to go beyond the expectations in all three success criteria outlined.

Reflections

Research indicates that educators across Ontario struggle to incorporate the idea of *Growing Success* into their classroom practice (MacAlpine, 2017; Jang & Sinclair, 2017). When reading submissions, I noticed that most teacher candidates shared insightful rationales for their assessment decisions and that reflections about the assessment tools cited ideas and policies indicated in *Growing Success*. Connections between the curriculum, the submitted assessment tool, and Ministry policy documents were abundant. Almost all teacher candidates cited the curriculum documents in their assignment, demonstrating the ability to connect curriculum to instruction and assessment. Most showed a strong ability to reflect on their work and to rationalize subsequent instructional moves.

Not all teachers enter the teaching profession with adequate professional development opportunities for classroom assessment (Stiggins, 1995). Torrance and Pryor (1998) report that despite familiarity with assessment methods, teachers lack a knowledge base for making diagnostic interpretations about students' learning needs and adapting their instruction according to them (Shohamy, 2008). More empirical evidence from classroom research is necessary for understanding the most effective best assessment practices and how best to use assessment to develop students' autonomy as change agents. As a point of reflection, I wondered how I could embed an opportunity for teacher candidates to theoretically plan forward based on their reflections; in future sessions, I would have the teacher candidates reflect on their assessment tool and consider how it could or would drive instructional decisions going forward.

Some patterns observed in the submissions warrant mentioning here:

- Much of the reflection was connected to policy documents on assessment; in the future, I would make the need to connect to theoretical frameworks on assessment more explicit. The practice-to-educational theory connection could be strengthened because many of these connections were not explicitly made.
- Across many submissions, confusion surrounding assessment *for* learning perpetuates. Many submissions incorrectly identified assessment *for* learning (formative assessment) as assessment *as* learning (Ontario, 2010). Although descriptive feedback immediately ensured the misconception was addressed, going forward, an opportunity to review the assessment loop will ensure teacher candidates have consolidated this understanding.
- Particularly amongst secondary teacher candidates, there is still a reliance on "points out of total" in assessment with little regard for the achievement chart. This quantitative focus does not align well with the provincial achievement chart and its qualitative rubric. Further study of this finding is warranted.
- Many teacher candidates, particularly in the elementary panel, needed to consider the achievement chart's role in evaluation. Assessment and evaluation in Ontario occur across four categories (knowledge and understanding, thinking, application, and communication). Consideration for assessment of these categories is necessary. Further study of this finding is warranted.

- Some teacher candidates in kindergarten classrooms struggled to see the holistic orientation of the kindergarten program. In the future, this assignment must be shaped to ensure it includes kindergarten learners and the anecdotal nature of evaluation in the kindergarten program.

Overall, I believe this assignment was a successful addition to the action research and reflective practice course. It provided teacher candidates with a clear opportunity to reflect on their assessment practices and see the alignment between assessment theory and policy and what had occurred during their most recent field placement experience.

Future Considerations and Conclusion

As an early career teacher educator, engaging in self-study research provides continuous learning and allows me to reflect on my practice. Upon reflection, this assignment connected well to course learning objectives and provided valuable insights into teacher candidates learning on assessment and reflective practice. This assessment is one I will continue to use in the future, both in this course and potentially in others. The recursive nature of the task demonstrated the connection between practice and theory by requiring teacher candidates to reflect on using an assessment tool from field placement.

In the future, I would consider sharing feedback with teacher candidates first, without their assignment grades attached. I would then ask teacher candidates to reflect on their feedback (assessment *as* learning) and share what grade they would assign themselves based on the input. Having them rationalize this would further their reflective practice. After the grade is released, I also ask teacher candidates to share one key learning they had through the assignment that could apply in their future context. Providing an opportunity for further self-assessment helps close the assessment loop and further assists teacher candidates in moving from the orientation of students to educators (Hibbert, Ott, & Swift, 2022).

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