Portfolio assessment: Making connections, guiding change

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ABSTRACT: Three literacy teacher-educators chart the ways in which portfolio assessment impacted their program. They discuss the tension between the demands of national accreditation standards and faculty belief systems in more ecological approaches. They describe the processes of change that occurred programmatically and individually which continue to improve the literacy program.

KEYWORDS: Portfolio assessment, literacy, social practice, ecologically valid, college

> "(A)n ecological approach is…one which examines the social and mental embeddedness of human activities in a way which allows change (Barton, 1994, p. 32).

Like many other literacy teacher educators, we encountered a call to action when our accrediting agency, the International Reading Association (IRA), issued new teacher-preparation standards. Knowing that our program would be one of the first literacy programs to undergo a national review based on those new standards, we found ourselves navigating the murky waters of assessment. Not only did we need to satisfy the requirements set forth by our accrediting body, but we also needed to address faculty concerns that the bulk of the work would be meaningless and satisfy merely political ends and not our own. The program assessment framework we developed arose from conversations and tensions between national standards and faculty belief systems. Ultimately, we developed a framework that allowed us to collect data, meet the demands of our accrediting body, and continue fertile conversations about our program and assessment issues as a whole. We discovered that the conversations embedded in this process, and the dynamic changes that continue to occur within our literacy program, have been insightful. We also found that our conversations moved us away from talking about reading and writing as skill sets to conceptualizing literacy as a social practice. This continues to influence how we approach the implementation of our assessment system as well as how we design our individual course instruction.

As a program, we began working under a specific definition of literacy that focuses on literacy as a social practice, and moved away from viewing it as a technical and neutral skill. Drawing on Street's (1984, 2005) notions that literacy is about readers creating understandings based on the reader's needs, background knowledge and ideological beliefs,

we embraced the concept that meanings can shift depending on the reader's use of the text. This definition of literacy continues to challenge us to view assessment through a particular lens which values understanding, transferability and application as opposed to skills and knowledge sets. Dewey (1933) summarizes this idea when saying,

> To grasp the meaning of a thing, an event, or a situation is to see it in its relations to other things: to see how it operates or functions, what consequences follow from it, what causes it, what uses it can be put to. In contrast, what we have called the brute thing, the thing without meaning to us, is something whose relations are not grasped….The relation of means-consequences is the centre and heart of understanding (pp. 137, 146).

During those early conversations we wanted to create an ideal assessment system in which we observed our candidates applying their knowledge within the classroom with students. Additionally, we wanted to ask candidates to articulate the theory behind these practices, bringing their understandings and applications to the surface, thus encouraging metacognitive and reflective thinking. In doing this, we believed we could create an assessment tool that was both naturalistic and ecologically valid (Barton, 1994). By assessing both the application and reflection, we could see the inter-relationship between the candidates' activities and their environment in the classroom. However, due to issues of accountability and logistics, we realized that our ideal assessment system proved problematic.

Out of this realization, a tension emerged. When something sits in tension, multiple polarities act against one another, extending, stretching and straining the object to its limits or until it is taut. We, the authors, sit in tension when it comes to assessment. As teacher educators, we feel pulled, stretched and extended between how we conceptualize assessment and how IRA conceptualizes it. Though the standards use constructivist, trans-active language, the mere act of requiring us to quantitatively measure candidates' achievement, places the assessment process into an ideological framework that causes us to question the validity of that process. We quickly realized that the contradicting definitions of literacy, understanding and assessment caused our tension.

Out of this tension and need for an assessment tool, we began a collegial conversation exploring various options. To inform our conversation, we surveyed candidates, observed their classroom practices, and worked with them on their action research capstone projects. We concluded that candidates struggled with representing their knowledge and applying it. They sometimes failed to see the critical link between literacy theory and classroom practice, and they struggled with understanding why some classroom practices are more effective than others. Helping our candidates see this connection is critical for all literacy educators (Wilhelm, 2001) and is highly valued by us as a faculty.

Based on our definition of literacy, that literacy is embedded in life, we wanted an assessment tool that would examine that social embeddedness (Barton, 1994). That is, we wanted an assessment tool that would uncover the candidates' understandings through transfer and application in the classroom, as well as a synthesis of concepts and theory. We realized that portfolio assessment is a powerful means of monitoring candidates' knowledge and understandings. Claggett (1996) argues that portfolios can also support curricular goals, enhance student understanding through reflection, and provide valuable information about a given curriculum. Portfolios provide an intersection between instruction and assessment and

a means for students to value themselves as learners. Thus, we decided to design a portfolio that was both a *showcase* portfolio and a *formative* portfolio. A showcase portfolio displays the candidate's depth of knowledge and is a compilation of successfully completed work. A formative portfolio illustrates a candidate's learning processes over time and demonstrates growth. In that way, the portfolio was our attempt to merge the opposing definitions of literacy, understanding, and assessment in an ecologically valid way.

Procedurally, the transition toward portfolio assessment was smooth. A faculty member visited each graduate class and provided an overview of the portfolio and explained the rationale for adding this requirement. But below the surface of that procedural calm was an undercurrent of resentment. During almost all of the presentations, candidates sat politely, asked a few questions, and then seemed silently resigned to the assessment. But in one classroom, one candidate declared that the portfolio was nothing more than a hoop and predicted that we would lose candidates from our program. Her hostility spread throughout the classroom and the discussion waged for almost an hour. The course professor finally interrupted but reported later that the entire three-hour class was dominated by negative reactions to the portfolio requirement.

Not all members of the faculty were enthusiastic about the portfolio either. One said he had seen such trends come and go and that portfolio assessment was simply a bandwagon that had already left the station. Another predicted that candidates would leave our program for others. In fact, one colleague in another program within our college claimed that candidates were leaving the literacy program in droves and signing up for her program. Although we did have a few candidates change their majors, it was not the mass exodus some predicted.

Such tensions surrounding change are not unusual, of course. We might consider such change through the metaphor of an ecotone, the space between two ecosystems or habitats. Krall (1994) used the metaphor of an ecotone to describe an English department that experienced sometimes painful change under her leadership. Krall points out that in an ecotone the "edge effect" can bring about "rich and transitional zones and may provide great learning as well as suffering" (p. 4). And while "suffering" in this case might seem overly dramatic, anxiety over the portfolio continues for candidates. But, it is an anxiety they and faculty have decided has its benefits.

The portfolio has become both the space and the purpose for candidates to not only communicate their individual understandings and interactions, but also to articulate the common language established within the literacy program community. Barton (1994) uses the concept of ecology when discussing literacy practices and argues that "literacy is part of the environment and at the same time influences and is influenced by the environment" (p. 29). Though Barton is talking about a broader social definition of literacy, his concept can be applied to the small literacy community of graduate students who, each semester, must challenge themselves to consider what they have learned in their various courses and how that knowledge can impact their professional lives. Barton points out that to be literate, one has to be "confident in these practices" (p. 32). The portfolio enables candidates to grow their confidence in their own abilities to link theory, research and practice in their own classroom environments.

In designing the portfolio as a communicative space for both individual as well as communal assessment, we incorporated common assessments that we refer to as key assignments. We created one key assignment for each of the 12 courses in the program. The requirements of each key assignment align with the standards established by IRA and provide an opportunity for candidates to demonstrate their understandings of meaningful practice. Candidates refer to the completed assignments and reflect on them periodically as they progress through the program. The key assignments are the showcase aspect of the portfolio.

The following is an example of a representative key assignment. Early in the program, candidates take a course focusing on the foundations of reading and writing processes. For this key assignment, candidates construct a graphic organizer to compare and contrast the major schools of thought that have historically influenced literacy instruction and research. We use this key assignment to evaluate four elements of IRA's (2003) Standard One: Foundational Knowledge.

   1.1. knowledge of psychological, sociological, and linguistic foundations of reading and writing processes and instruction
   1.2. knowledge of reading research and histories of reading
   1.3. knowledge of language development and reading acquisition and the variations related to cultural and linguistic diversity, and
   1.4. knowledge of the major components of reading and how they are integrated in fluent reading

We also use this key assignment to encourage candidates to begin connecting literacy theory with classroom practice. A graphic organizer was chosen because it represents a naturalistic application of meaningful practice as learners often use graphic organizers to build a frame of reference as they approach new material (Vacca & Vacca, 2008). Before we implemented the graphic organizer assignment, it was often difficult for our candidates to understand the connections between various theories and the application to practice. However, by creating their own graphic organizers, candidates began to synthesize their knowledge and transfer it to their practice. We, too, have found graphic organizers to be a helpful tool. In fact, we created one when aligning the goals of our literacy courses with the IRA standards. We created another graphic organizer during the design process to help us see the intersections between courses, standards, portfolio elements and other assessment points.

Because reflection is a key component in learning, we also require candidates to write a metacognitive description explaining their thinking on how they showed the connections among theories on their graphic organizer. Additionally, we ask them to explain why they chose the format they did. In class, candidates verbally explain each aspect of their organizer to demonstrate their ability to explain, compare and contrast the theories. The graphic organizer and the candidates' written explanation are then showcased in the portfolio.

We also sought a means to assess the program. We knew that we wanted candidates to make cross-course connections in hopes that candidates would begin to synthesize individual courses into a meaningful whole. To do this, we included reflective essays as an integral part of the portfolio. Claggett (1996) reminds us, "The process of developing the reflective commentary is an invaluable learning experience for students. As they revisit a body of

work, re-examine it with the added perspective of time, and explore its relevance, students gain both the time and the means of actually seeing their learning processes in action" (p. 123). Five times throughout the literacy program, candidates review key assignments and course content, compare their understandings with the IRA standards and write a reflection. We feel the reflective essays are the heart of the portfolio because they provide a way for candidates to look carefully and thoughtfully at themselves as learners and teachers. The portfolio then becomes part of the ecology of our program. It plays a role in maintaining a common language, allows for a diversity of experience, and communicates candidates' growing understandings regarding literacy theory, research and practice. Barton (1994) argues that this ecological approach allows us to demonstrate the social embeddedness of literacy and that "to be literate is to be active" (p. 32). The portfolio has become one focus of conversation among candidates and creates within them a sense of urgency. Their concerns foster conversations not only with faculty but amongst themselves, increasing that sense of active literacy around this particular literacy event – the portfolio.

The combination of key assignments and reflective essays provide faculty with a pathway for thinking about and assessing candidate knowledge in a formative way to illustrate candidates' growth over time (Underwood, 1999). But, it does even more than this. The process of creating our program's portfolio requirement has benefited us as teacher educators in a number of ways. First, it has enabled us to ease the tension between our accreditation agency, which imposes a need for standardized assessment of candidates, and the faculty's desire to create a more ecologically valid assessment tool. The process of meeting regularly to review candidates' portfolios has opened a space for collegial conversations about literacy. Since we all have epistemological differences, the portfolio process has enabled us to recognize and respect the diversity in each other's point of view. As time goes on, we have witnessed the benefits of having a faculty with divergent views on literacy because it helps us to value individual perspectives while maintaining program diversity and academic rigour as well. Barton (1994) reminds us "that the structure and patterns in a community are the product of processes at the level of the individual" (p. 31). The structure of the portfolio and the pattern of review coupled with the rich conversations that take place among faculty during the review process illustrate for us the role that individuals play in the assessment and life of the program. But it also reminds us of the role that individual candidates play in the construction of our program, our thoughts on literacy, and the ways by which assessment can move these processes along.

The portfolio process has become a mechanism to guide our own individual practices. As individuals within the literacy community, we use the content of candidates' portfolios and our own reflection to make changes in course content, learning experiences, lectures and presentations. For example, in the review process we found candidates struggled to clearly and accurately articulate and apply the significance of literacy theory. In that way, the portfolio made us all aware of the need to emphasize theory and the connection it has to practice. We experimented with a variety of course readings and new assignments to help candidates with this difficult task. Since then, we have noted improvements in the candidates' abilities to communicate the relationship between theory and practice within the portfolio reflections. Therefore, the portfolio became the catalyst for change.

Our use of the portfolio has also impacted the program as a whole. Based on candidates' portfolio reflections, we recognized a need for more field experiences in diverse community settings. With this in mind, we added another field experience to meet this need. In order to facilitate not only better synthesis on the part of our candidates, but a more spiral and cohesive curriculum, we revised the sequence of core courses in the program. This action was based directly on the candidates' portfolio reflections.

In the end, we recognize change has occurred. We implemented an assessment process that was far more effective than we anticipated. This change allows for sustainability and improvement within the program.   Change is an active process, one in which we have become more confident as literacy teacher educators.

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