

CO-CONSTRUCTING ASSESSMENT IN TEACHING AND LEARNING: A SEASON FOR DEPTH, REFLECTION, AND RESPONSIVE TEACHING

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The College of Idaho

The College of Idaho, a small liberal arts college, was founded in 1891 as the state's first private liberal arts college. The College is a "close-knit community of 1,000 scholars, athletes, artists, and critical thinkers" (College of Idaho, 2023, para. 1). The residential campus is located near historic downtown Caldwell, Idaho. The education department employs four full time faculty and two part-time faculty and is one of 18 departments that make up the campus. The education program offers a fifth-year certification with the option to add a master's program and on average has between 7-15 pre-service teacher candidates enrolled. Pre-service teacher candidates complete their undergraduate studies and then stay for a year-long student teaching placement while completing methods and research coursework. The following year, teacher candidates earn their Idaho teaching credential and a master's degree.

The pandemic offered opportunity to learn. Post pandemic offered time to reflect upon those experiences and to interpret that reality and to seek to understand the curriculum (Pinar, 2012). We entered Fall 2020 with the smallest fifth year cohort in the program's history. Fifty percent of the group decided not to enroll in fall courses due to uncertainty prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. While this was not sustainable for the program, there was little option, and it is worth recognizing that the small cohort was a gift in itself. Rapid changes were implemented across the nation. Daily pandemic reports shifted the direction in teaching platforms. The story of this class unfolds here through a *currere*-based reflection. Pinar (2012) describes *currere* as an attempt to "run the course" (p. 43). As such, this piece works to determine "what has been and what is now the nature" of this unique educational experience (Pinar, 1994, p. 20).

In an essay describing the application of the *currere* approach, Poetter (2015) summarizes this process unfolding when we purposefully engage text and the cycles of our life stories together in an effort to construct new meanings, understandings and insights, and to conduct complicated conversations. This foundation guides the journey of this reflection. The steps are woven into the text marking moments, naming processes initiating change, articulating aspects of the course that are forever altered, and detailing an organic rethinking of a course prompted by teaching during the pandemic.

RETURNING TO THE PAST

I, Terah, revisit fall 2011, the semester I first taught the assessment course in the fifth-year program. This time period also reflects the framework I adopted hook line and sinker. It is captured within the graduate catalogue course description for EDU 520 Assessment for Teaching for Learning:

The course is designed to guide future teachers through the various processes of educational assessment. The relationship among teaching, learning,

and assessment will be emphasized. Special emphasis will be placed upon creating, administering, analyzing, and communicating the results of teacher-made tests for classroom application. Interpretation of standardized tests will also be addressed. (College of Idaho Graduate Catalogue, 2022, para. 1)

This language has not changed in over a decade, likely two. I have structured the course similarly over time, relying on the same standards to shape the same learning. In essence, I have let the standards dictate my teaching. I have not questioned why these structures are the ones shaping such a critical piece of my work. Nor have I taken the time to rethink what might be, until now. The structure in place, as well as the course description in the catalogue, was based on the work of an individual who taught prior to my hire; what had been done continued to be done with little question.

LOOKING THE OTHER WAY

Out of the ordinary circumstances spur on change or at least offer space to recognize the need for change. Moving into the fall season of 2020 revealed that nothing about this term was normal. Program enrollment was the lowest in history, institutional instruction shifted to online platforms, faculty members were encouraged to work from home, student teaching placements were conducted virtually, in remote learning settings, or in hybrid models. Because 2020's fifth-year cohort was so small, made up of just Megan, Hannah, and Spencer, we had the option to meet off campus and in outdoor settings. I jumped at the chance to share my peaceful farmscape with others.

MERGING STORIES

The teacher candidates were eager for the interaction and the opportunity to hold class around the pond, weather permitting. Together we were a quartet, venturing into uncharted territory. We had time and space for breaking bread together, we had time to deconstruct and question, to unlearn and unravel, time to rethink and establish appropriate foundations to our approach of assessment. bell hooks (1984) set the stage by urging for us "to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions" (p. 12). We were on a journey to understanding what assessment might hold for us as teachers.

OUR BIOGRAPHIC PRESENT

Together we sat. We literally started with a blank slate. Our first session included dishing up plates of spaghetti in my small and humble farm kitchen. We sat in a circle in camp chairs under the walnut tree near the pond eating our food, discussing events, and sharing experiences.

- The Teacher Educator, Terah, brought with her 16 years of teaching experience in private liberal arts institutions. Prior to teaching in higher education, she taught all subjects in the 5/6th grade bilingual classroom.
- The 2nd grade Teacher Candidate, Megan, had field experience during this time taking place in virtual and hybrid K-3rd grade classrooms in local elementary schools. Upon completing teacher licensure and defending her master's research, she was hired by the local school district to teach 2nd grade.
- The 4th grade Teacher Candidate, Hannah, received her Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education in May of 2020, and her Master of Arts in Teaching in

May of 2021. When the assessment class took place, her teaching experience was with upper-elementary grade levels, and she has since been hired to teach 4th grade in a local school district.

- The Kindergarten Teacher Candidate, Spencer, completed his field experience during this time in a kindergarten classroom. After the pandemic, he defended his master's research and became employed as the Director of Student Accessibility Services at a private liberal arts institution.

Conversation naturally went to the wonders of how to teach kindergarten and fourth graders in completely virtual environments. How would students learn? How would teachers know what was actually accomplished? Would there be negative hold over from poor performance on testing? Would all students have access to the Internet? What does absence look like in these settings? None of us had answers to these questions, but we discussed them and pondered them together, and we thought about what our immediate future might be. Our conversation that first night took almost two hours. Looking back, the questions were closely tied to assessment. We did not conclude the conversations; rather, we set them aside to be continued.

Our next “blank slate” activity was to explore what we thought we knew about assessment. We applied backwards design techniques (McTigue & Wiggins, 1998) to develop an assessment curriculum, under guidance, reconstructing the course with the end in mind. This was a complex action of using ourselves to learn about the concept that we then worked to apply within our own educational settings. With four members, the messiness of the navigation was manageable.

Sheets of butcher paper were set up around the pond. Each of us added content that unraveled what thought we knew about assessment and ultimately and organically determined our learning objectives. We loosely followed McTigue and Wiggins' (1998) backwards design principles: of identifying desired results, determining assessment evidence of our own learning, and then planning learning activities and experiences that drove our instructional time.

Our next step was to determine our belief system surrounding assessment. We compared and differentiated concepts of “assessment” and “visible learning.” This dialogue and course activities revealed that we held basic knowledge about the terms, but we struggled to fully connect the two, and most importantly, we struggled to transfer the concepts to actual classroom practice.

The group had a common factor—all had participated in the same district training about visible learning, an assessment framework championed by John Hattie (2012). This framework referred to making student learning “visible” to both teachers and students. A major take away from this training was that teachers were responsible for shaping the process that helps students take ownership of their own learning. According to the district training, the “learning” component referred to approaching the act of teaching in terms of its impact on student learning (Hattie, 2012).

All members had basic levels of practitioner application of the visible learning concepts. All were certifying in the elementary authorization, all taught within the same district, and all received similar professional development training through that district. The group unanimously determined that understanding assessment through the lens of visible learning would be a beneficial use of our time in the assessment course. We determined that Hattie's framework would supplement our learning journey.

The course roadmap developed, it was time to co-construct the syllabus. We intentionally named each step of the process—because the act of identifying learner needs, constructing the syllabus aligned to standards, and selecting activities and assessment outcomes that act as indicators were all authentic steps within the assessment process. It was critical that we took time to recognize and name each. We examined those learning competencies that guided our time together. The “pin the standard” or the alignment process (aligning standard to indicator to outcome activity or project) yielded the following plan.

- I know where I’m going
 - Defining Assessment and Understanding Background
 - Project One: Defining Assessment and Teacher Interview
- I have the tools for the journey
 - Assessment Tools and Practicing Strategies
 - Project Two: The Visible Learning Strategy Evaluation (a running record- evaluating assessment strategies)
- I am capable of monitoring my work
 - Using Assessment Knowledge; Application to Real Life Classrooms
 - Project Three: Assessment Philosophy and Evaluation Policy
- I recognize when I am ready for what I need to do next
 - Visible Learning Assessment and Call to Leadership
 - Final Project: The Classroom and Beyond—A synthesis and application of knowledge (Frey et al., 2018)

Collaboratively, we discussed possible evidence that might demonstrate knowledge gained at each step in the process. Poster pages with the learning task projects were displayed around the pondscape, and the standards and learning competencies were separated into individual pieces. Collaboratively, we assigned or pinned each standard and learning competency to the learning task project that it matched best. This action took time; however, it was time well spent. Pacing and moving through the text became a non-issue. The learning and application of our own assessment processes easily transferred to the K-12 classroom settings.

RECONSTRUCTING

One visible outcome was that we co-constructed a competency-based matrix that guided instruction over the semester. This activity offered teacher candidates a firsthand experience in constructing competency-based matrices. Together we documented our learning; we created a guide that helped us track learning and informed the happenings of each class session. The learning about assessment was formative and authentic. As a collaborative team we participated in an in-depth practice of developing a standards-

based report card from scratch. In the process of re-thinking how assessment looks in the classroom, this experience offered solid practice with standards-based assessment.

Because the assessment course is strategically offered during the student teaching placements, candidates gain classroom experience concurrently. For this group, our class sessions were held in-person. The entire course was metacognitive in nature and demanded constant interaction, visitation, and articulation of why we did what we did concerning assessment.

Pandemic-induced course shifts included the use of a new text that matched the needs of the group, a collaborative and dynamic course construction, the physical organization of the outdoor classroom, intentional selection of and paring down of course activities, and the construction of uniquely focused topics for the authorization level. These shifts were long overdue and beneficial.

- Knowledge of needs and former training allowed for a uniquely and relevant constructed curriculum, including the selection of a text tailor-selected for the teacher candidates, that more aptly addressed teacher preparation standards.
- A co-constructed syllabus and shared teaching allowed for authentic curriculum development.
- A face-to face outdoor classroom venue fostered a safe environment.
- A narrowed focus on elementary practice allowed for depth focused on elementary classroom practices and applications.

With two class periods to spare, the group made a remarkable and deep breakthrough, one that, anecdotally and historically, has not occurred during the course. In a collaborative, storytelling chat discussion, where each member contributed, added, and expanded or polished the work done previously, the group carefully and articulately defined “assessment,” “visible learning,” and “evaluation.” This moment marked a checkpoint in our learning, as noted in the collaborative remarks below:

Assessment – any form of gauging and documenting where a student is, at a particular point in time in their learning that can be understood and presented in a way (possibly different ways) to the student, teacher, administration, and parents. A place for all to understand what they know and where we can go from there. To set goals for growth. Assessment is a communication tool and serves as feedback from the student to the teacher to help the teacher understand the student’s current standing. Assessments are a way for teachers to explain to parents and others where students are if they need more assistance. Assessments also provide students the opportunity to see where they are on the learning continuum; assessments can help determine if students retain information, understand the material, and can apply or transfer that knowledge.

Visible Learning – is an assessment tool that prompts teachers to reflect on their assessment by looking through the eyes of their learners. Visible learning allows for students to take responsibility for their own learning and identify the progress that they have made and the steps that they need to take next. Students can see what they have learned and where they need to grow in their learning so they know in what area they will need more support in-order to grow, along with providing better insight for teachers into the retainment of material by students. Visible learning allows for the setting of goals and reflection for both the students and the teacher.

Evaluation – is assessing the student knowledge through quizzes, tests, projects, writing assignments, small group activities, and more to see what the students have retained and to see if we need to review or alter the way we are teaching materials in the classroom. Evaluation is a check in and an overview all at the same time. Academically, socially, or otherwise. It is a place to see how far we have come, see where we have gone, and see what gaps we can find and fill in. Just as an assessment is a communication from the student to the teacher, the evaluation is the communication from the teacher to the student. Evaluation is a pivotal point in the assessment process and the means through which the next steps are formulated and happen. Evaluation is making sense of the student data to truly come to an understanding of what the students know and have yet to learn and to help the student understand these areas themselves.

EXPERIENCE AND SELVES MERGING, MEANING CONSTRUCTED

The summary of these terms act as evidence of enduring understandings that will remain; they are embedded in our philosophies and are engrained in our teaching. Further applied, each of us will use these new understandings to ground us in specific and positive mindframes that will indeed promote healthy and productive assessment practices crucial for learning to happen. This was a season that allowed each of us to claim: “I really get it!” We will strive to lead and to be responsible for the learning that occurs under our care. Thus, a major conclusion was that time in this class was well spent.

So, what really changed in the grand scheme of teaching and learning in this assessment course? In closing, each of us share a few takeaways from the pondscape assessment class offered during the pandemic that ultimately initiated change in the immediate setting and beyond.

Terah: What understandings must remain? Blank slates are not all bad. I must be in tune with specific needs of the group and not rely so heavily on existing structures used previously. Great learning gains are made through learning by doing and by journeying together; I must not separate myself from my learners, especially when the course topics are assessment and learning. This investment was intense and constant and demanded that I learn alongside, that I work to understand where each learner was, that I had a pulse on where we needed to go, and that I was comfortable in sharing the role with teacher candidates in determining how to “get there.” This shared role in teaching and planning was crucial in the understandings that emerged from this course. I was reminded of the power of relationship and the importance of togetherness. I will forever conduct an open inventory with teacher candidates as a first course activity. This course in particular reminded me that less really is more, and that course quality should not be measured by the number of activities that one can fit into a term. I was reminded that the power of learning is refreshing and opportunistic. I was humbly reminded that sharing the control, co-teaching, and co-construction is not easy, but it is worthwhile. And I must remember that I, too, am a learner, and therefore, I need to use new and unfamiliar resources in my teaching.

Hannah: There are countless course concepts, ideas, and themes that I found resonant this 2020 term—things so resonant and powerful because they have shaped my outlook on assessment, have shown me ways to use assessment to empower, and have introduced me to a new and upcoming (and incredibly exciting) wave in the educational world. I particularly enjoyed learning about visible learning and how I can use that in

assessment to meet a student where they are at, capitalizing on what they know, and using it to guide my subsequent instruction and shape the student's next steps. I feel very excited, hopeful, and optimistic leaving this class with my new knowledge, and there truly isn't anything I feel like I didn't get out of it or think that I didn't learn enough about. And if there are any instances in the future where I realize there are things I wish I would have learned more about, I feel that I have the right perspective on assessment and grasp on what it truly means, that I could accurately research it myself in an unbiased manner, which is something I would not have been able to say on the first day of class when I was obviously very biased and had negative feelings about assessments.

Megan: Most resonant from the 2020 term is the idea that everything is assessment—visible learning tools and strategies can be assessment-based. These ideas are great but are only useful when put into action. They resonated with me because it took a bit of a journey to get to this point of understanding. We, as a group, started with heavy restraints on our understanding of these concepts, but through the course of our class sessions and large modules, I found myself gaining more and more perspective each time.

Spencer: I can say I know about visible learning and assessments and how they are different and what makes each useful when teaching. One of the most important things for me is that I learned how to observe my students learning. Most of what I took away from this course resonated with me because each session was so memorable and so enjoyable and was done on the basis of relationship. Beyond that, the concepts we did address were relevant and were applied in our classrooms. I learned the value of giving the right feedback to students, and I got to practice all of it.

Together we journeyed. Together we learned.

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