

Student Teaching Quality as Communicated Through Performance Assessment

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One of the most important aspects of becoming a teacher is the student teaching experience. Student teaching approximates the work of K-12 teaching, but the student teacher is a guest in someone else's established classroom and has the responsibilities of a teacher while designated and paying tuition as a student. The success of student teachers is measured by how they apply the knowledge acquired from college content courses and educational pedagogy and methods courses in a real classroom setting.

How, then, does a preparation program know how "good" a student teacher is? And what might student teaching evaluation predict about a new teacher's ability to influence learning in the classroom? K-12 teachers are evaluated through administrator observation, classroom test scores, and other system metrics; student teachers are judged by a university-based supervisor. In most models, the supervisor visits the school periodically for a series of formal observations and uses a performance assessment instrument, typically a highly detailed rubric. The observations follow a cycle of submitted lesson plans, live or videotaped lessons, and then a conference to review scores and receive feedback. Much more can be said and has been studied about the supervisor's role as a coach and as a partner with the K-12 cooperating teacher in mentoring the student teacher, but for predictive measures of new teacher quality, the use of the performance assessment instrument is key.

The process of assessment and feedback given to new teachers is so important to the teaching process that accreditation bodies such as CAEP (The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation) require evidence of the validity and reliability of the performance instruments used across a program. Each year, many teacher education programs invest time in training university supervisors on the procedures of a performance assessment. Some programs adopt, or are required to adopt, specific instruments; some instruments are research based, others are not.

Performance Assessment in Implementation – An Example

In the past year, the teacher education program at the University of Houston has worked to change the way its supervisors carry out the assessment of student teachers. The intention is to find ways for the performance assessment process to better enable supervisors and host schools to communicate about student teacher effectiveness. The UH Teacher Preparation Program began a formal study of the student teacher performance assessment process to both support the growth of student teachers and to measure the quality of its pre-service teacher candidates. The inquiry had its beginnings in the summer of 2015, when a team of student teaching supervisors and clinical faculty created and presented a scoring guide for use with the UH performance assessment rubric. The idea was to improve the consistency of supervisor evaluations, and more importantly to expand the way the supervisors could talk to student teachers about areas of strengths and areas that needed work. There are significant program challenges in learning how to make the best use of student teaching performance assessment data. This change was supported by data that identified the Spring 2015 cohort had received consistently high scores each time they were observed by their supervisors largely as an artifact of the scoring system.

As another part of this effort to increase the usefulness of the formal observation process for evaluating student teachers, the Teacher Education Program made an important change to the way evaluations are used to calculate the student teacher's final grade. There is a widespread perception and practice that earning an A in student

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teaching is expected. This is not just a matter of tradition: principals see any grade less than an A as signaling a serious problem or deficit in the student teacher's ability to be effective.

Several changes were instituted. Instead of using points for each observation, supervisors were asked to give detailed feedback using the rubric and to use all three categories - "emerging," "developing," and "proficient" as appropriate to indicate the student teacher's performance. Student teaching supervisors were given opportunities to provide constructive and specific feedback - even when it was negative - without negative consequences to a student teacher's grade.

In the next semester (Fall 2015), a cohort of 310 student teachers were evaluated using the revised rubric and the de-emphasis on points/grade. Because of these changes, this group of student teachers should have received far more nuanced constructive/critical feedback with supervisors. That semester, 24 supervisors generated 1550 formal observations of the 310 student teachers. The scores from the previous semester (Spring 2015) and Fall 2015 were put on the same 1-10 scale and compared. Results showed that the average score across all formal observations of the Spring 2015 cohort was 9.2 (sd, 1.1); the average score across all formal observations of student teachers in the Fall 2015 cohort averaged 7.3 (sd, 2.8).

To find more about the impact of the changes, UH student teachers in their second semester (N = 78) in Fall 2015 were surveyed about the experiences with the revised formal observation process. They commented on how much good feedback and clear communication about expectations mattered to them, especially when their host cooperating teachers were so pressed for time. Even given "harsher" ratings (not automatic A's), 71% of the student teachers strongly agreed with the ratings they received from their supervisors; 95% agreed that feedback from the supervisor had helped their ratings improve over the semester. Only 3% did not feel confident in how the rubric could be used to improve their teaching practices.

What can we learn?

It is challenging to collect and use data systematically in ways that can be relevant to teacher candidate improvement and critically important to faculty and to school partners. This example demonstrates that relatively minor changes in policy can transform the way an instrument can be used to make it much more useful to a developmental process.