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Responding to edTPA: Transforming Practice or Applying Shortcuts?

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Abstract

Some states have used new teacher performance assessments in an attempt to improve teacher quality for more than two decades. New teacher performance assessments include performance expectations, scoring rubrics, and writing prompts, which are organized into subject-specific handbooks. Teacher candidates completing performance assessments assemble portfolios comprised of teaching artifacts and writing commentary. Early performance assessments focused on growth and professional development. EdTPA is the newest teacher performance assessment and it has been adopted by 24 states. Unlike previous new teacher performance assessments, stakeholders at various levels are using edTPA for credentialing and accountability purposes. The high-stakes features of edTPA may encourage use of strategies misaligned with the goal of improving new teacher effectiveness. Results from a case study show that candidates can apply strategies for earning points on edTPA. Although many of the strategies are connected to educational theory and practice, others are meant to earn points and simplify portfolio assembly.

***Keywords:* edTPA, performance assessment, reform, strategies, teacher education**

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Many teacher educators are familiar with Teacher Performance Assessment or TPA. However, a fact less well known is that this acronym has been part of educational literature for more than 25 years. Reinhartz and Van Cleaf (1986) used it as an abbreviation for *Teach-Practice-Apply*. Back then, TPA supporters claimed it as a new paradigm for “facilitating change” and “ensuring instructional effectiveness” (Reinhartz & Van Cleaf, 1986, p. 7). The TPA created by Reinhartz and Van Cleaf has come and gone, but it shares an important similarity with the TPA of today. Namely, supporters of both models claim that TPA has the potential to transform teaching.

According to advocates, TPA is “transformative for prospective teachers because the process requires candidates to actually demonstrate the knowledge and skills required to help all students learn in real classrooms” (edTPA, n.d.a). Others have suggested that TPA is the “closest we can come to a complete model of what good teaching looks like” (Renner, n.d.). Strong claims about the virtues of TPA, rebranded as edTPA to emphasize its educative qualities, are perhaps one reason it is being pilot tested in 24 states with plans to expand nationwide by 2015 (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2011). Whether edTPA is adopted as a national test of new teacher competence remains to be seen. However, the assessment is widespread and some states are planning to include edTPA scores as a qualification for licensure.

Use of edTPA for credentialing is certain to have a significant impact on teacher candidates. However, there may be more implications for liberal arts colleges of teacher education. Liberal arts education emphasizes the importance of individuals, community, and shared responsibility. EdTPA is a standardized performance assessment and standardization deemphasizes individual variation to promote conformity according to external performance expectations. However, surveying the history of new teacher performance assessments suggests that they were designed for both credentialing and professional growth purposes.

Development of New Teacher Performance Assessments

One of the first teacher performance assessments was Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST). BEST was developed in Connecticut in 1986 as part of a broader effort to improve teacher quality (Kellor, 2002). BEST requires assembly of a teaching portfolio by newly licensed teachers according to performance expectations, scoring rubrics, and writing prompts, all of which is outlined in subject-specific handbooks. One portion of the portfolio includes teaching artifacts such as lesson plans, video recordings, and student work samples. Another portion of the portfolio includes reflective commentary for analyzing teaching and learning (Kellor, 2002). In the BEST system, scorers generate comprehensive feedback reports for use by teachers in identifying areas for growth, along with suggestions for professional development.

In 1998, legislators in California also initiated reform efforts designed to improve teacher quality (Okhremtchouk et al., 2009). The steps taken in California were similar to those taken in Connecticut except that California legislators also focused on improving teacher preparation. Reform activities in California led to the creation of the California Teacher Performance Assessment (CalTPA) and Performance Assessment of California Teachers (PACT).

CalTPA was created by a consortium of California universities and is also organized around performance expectations, scoring rubrics, and writing prompts (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2008). However, instead of a portfolio, CalTPA requires assembly of four tasks focused on planning, instruction, assessment, and reflection. CalTPA also includes pre-made practice opportunities in the form of case studies. These case studies are used by teacher preparation faculty to assist candidates in assembling the four tasks (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2008).

PACT is the latest and most relevant performance assessment with respect to edTPA since edTPA is modeled after it (Darling-Hammond, 2010). However, the link between these two assessments transcends similar content. PACT was created by a

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second consortium led by Stanford as an alternative to CalTPA (Okhremtchouk, et al., 2009). The Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning and Equity (SCALE) would later transform PACT into edTPA and recruit Pearson Incorporated as its operations partner. One feature underlying this history is that CalTPA was developed in cooperation with the Educational Testing Service (ETS). Both ETS and Pearson compete for market share in the area of standardized test administration (Public Broadcasting Service, 2002).

Similar to PACT, candidates completing edTPA assemble a portfolio. The portfolio is organized according to performance expectations, scoring rubrics, and writing prompts. Directions are outlined in subject-specific handbooks, which are divided into three tasks focused on planning, instruction, and assessment. There are 15 rubrics, with five levels each, equally divided between the three tasks. Portfolios generally consist of three to five lesson plans, 15 to 20 minutes of video, and work samples from three students. Candidates respond to prompts by writing approximately 30 pages of commentary to describe their knowledge of students, their use of subject-specific pedagogy, and analysis of student learning.

The transformation of PACT into edTPA has produced some interesting claims. For example, PACT rubrics are aligned to California's Teacher Performance Expectations (Chung, 2008). By association, edTPA is also aligned to California teaching standards, even though literature describing edTPA infers inclusion of standards from other stakeholders (edTPA, n.d.a). In addition, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) uses research from studies based on PACT to support the effectiveness of edTPA (edTPA, n.d.b). Although PACT and edTPA are similar, there are significant differences in administration which make application of research results from PACT to edTPA problematic.

One difference is that PACT handbooks and rubrics are available through an open website which does not require special permission to access (see <http://www.pacttpa.org>). In addition, PACT portfolios are scored locally by faculty, supervisors, and mentor teachers, who are trained at consortium schools (Stansbury, 2006a). Another difference is that teacher candidates completing PACT are

“encouraged to seek assistance, input and feedback from university supervisors, cooperating/master teachers, [and] university instructors...” as the portfolio is assembled (PACT Consortium, 2009, p. 25). In addition, PACT scoring policies state that the assessment is “designed to provide formative assessment information during the preparation program for use by the candidate, instructors, and supervisors for the purpose of improving the teaching knowledge, skill, and ability of the candidate” (Stansbury, 2006b, p. 1).

Alternatively, Pearson Incorporated (2013a) prohibits distribution of handbooks and rubrics through open sites. Those administering edTPA at institutions must ensure assessment materials are not shared with unauthorized persons. Portfolio scorers include teachers and teacher education faculty recruited and trained by Pearson using online methods. Portfolios are also scored online. In addition, edTPA administrative rules prohibit university instructors and supervisors from providing substantive feedback on portfolios before submitting them to Pearson for scoring. For example, instructors and supervisors are not allowed to suggest changes to commentary, use rubrics to provide analysis, or assist candidates with selection of video clip evidence (Pearson Incorporated, 2013a).

Incentives for Adopting edTPA

Changes in administration have been accompanied by other shifts in terms of why states adopt edTPA and the way that results are used. For example, scoring rubrics for the second phase of Race to the Top (RTTT) reward states for developing “effectiveness measures” which link K–12 student test performance to teacher education programs (United States Department of Education, 2012, p. 6). Additional criteria on RTTT rubrics infer that state authorities will use performance assessment results to sanction teacher education programs (United States Department of Education, 2011). In addition, some reformers envision edTPA as the first layer of a progressive evaluation system for tracking competence throughout a teacher’s career by correlating performance assessment results with student test scores (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

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Along with RTTT, incentives for adopting new teacher assessment schemes were predicated on legislation included in the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) of 2009. States electing to receive ARRA funds after the most recent recession agreed to develop and maintain teacher preparation accountability measures and elaborate K–12 student data tracking systems (United States Department of Education, 2009). Grants awarded through ARRA prepared states for phase two of RTTT, strengthening the link between new teacher education, performance evaluation, and K–12 test achievement.

Influential professional organizations have also advocated for teacher performance assessments. For example, AACTE promotes edTPA to establish one assessment model for defining new teacher competence and also to counter criticisms that teacher training programs are ineffective (edTPA, n.d.c; Robinson, 2012). AACTE's support of edTPA aligns with policy statements from the American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association, and Council of Chief State School Officers. These groups have indicated the importance of creating new teacher recruitment, training, and induction systems to improve the profession and reduce potential exclusion from reform efforts (American Federation of Teachers, n.d.; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012; National Education Association, 2013).

There is some evidence to show that the adoption of edTPA has been helpful in keeping stakeholder groups in the debate surrounding teacher preparation reform. For example, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) rated teacher education programs across the United States, but neglected to incorporate performance assessment results, specifically results from edTPA (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Wallace, 2013). Groups involved in teacher training have identified this omission as a significant flaw (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2013). However, using edTPA results to counter groups like NCTQ has required a significant expenditure of time and resources for everyone involved.

Resource expenditures associated with edTPA are often first

discussed in terms of the price teacher candidates pay to have their portfolios scored, which is \$300 for an entire portfolio and another \$100 for individual task retakes (Pearson Incorporated, 2013b). One explanation for these fees is that test developers spend three to ten times more to create performance assessments in comparison to objective tests, which have traditionally been used for credentialing purposes (Stecher, 2010). The cost of edTPA to faculty and staff is more difficult to quantify. However, most agree that accommodating edTPA requires support through various methods such as course redesign and faculty training.

Using new teacher performance assessments as a method for improving teacher quality has become more complicated since Connecticut designed BEST more than 25 years ago. Competing interests at the state, federal, and corporate level have converged to influence development of edTPA in ways that are different from the design and implementation principles used for CalTPA and PACT. In addition, linking edTPA performance as a credentialing requirement and charging hundreds of dollars for a score may detract from the goal of improving teacher quality. There is some anecdotal evidence to show that the interplay of competing interests is having some negative effect already. For example, one faculty member involved in pilot testing edTPA stated that, “students have already learned to manipulate it... their answers are shaped by what the test requires” (Winerip, 2012).

Although there is limited evidence showing that teacher candidates are manipulating edTPA, there is evidence showing that high-stakes assessments in general influence student and instructor behavior in negative ways (Campbell, 1979; Haertel, 1999; Rouse, Hannawy, Goldhaber, & Figlio, 2013). Two examples of the negative effects of linking performance to consequences include narrowing curricula to focus on tested subject matter and coaching students to use boilerplate answers (Rouse et al., 2013; Williams, 2009).

Exploratory Case Study

The effects of edTPA on new teacher competencies are relatively unknown, unless research using PACT is considered. This means

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that determining the positive and negative effects of edTPA is a topic future researchers will need to investigate. However, one question underpinning this research is whether edTPA scores can be positively influenced using specific strategies. The exploratory case study that follows investigates this question by examining similarities and differences between high-scoring and low-scoring edTPA portfolios.

Participants in the study included 57 female and 17 male teacher education candidates enrolled in three programs at the same university. All participants created an edTPA portfolio and submitted them for scoring to Pearson Incorporated during the same academic quarter. Although candidates received some training on edTPA, portfolio evidence and commentary was developed independently by each candidate, according to administrative procedures defined by Pearson Incorporated (Pearson Incorporated, 2013a).

Forty-one of the participants were enrolled in a graduate program and 33 were enrolled in an undergraduate program. Graduate candidates were in either a one-year or a two-year track, with a 38 or 14 week internship, respectively. The education component of the undergraduate program is four academic quarters, with a 20 week internship. Table 1 shows a summary of participant and program characteristics.

Table 1
Participant and Program Characteristics

Track	n	Male	Weeks of Internship
Graduate One-Year	29	10	38
Graduate Two-Year	12	4	14
Undergraduate	33	3	20

Participants in this study completed edTPA portfolios in a variety of subject areas. However, three subject areas were disproportionately represented either by graduates or undergraduates. These areas included elementary literacy and mathematics, with 21 of the

27 portfolios coming from undergraduates, along with secondary mathematics and science, with 15 of the 18 portfolios coming from graduate students. Table 2 shows a summary of subject area portfolios according to each of the three program tracks.

Table 2
Distribution of Portfolio Subject Areas and Performance

	Graduate			Undergraduate	Mean	SD
	n	One-Year	Two-Year			
Elementary Literacy	16	3	2	11	3.18	.47
Elementary Mathematics	11	1	0	10	3.15	.42
Performing Arts	5	2	1	2	3.24	.47
Secondary English-Lang. Arts	13	5	5	3	3.08	.47
Secondary History-Soc. Studies	7	2	3	2	3.00	.27
Secondary Mathematics	5	3	0	2	3.12	.16
Secondary Science	13	11	1	1	3.31	.33
Visual Arts	3	1	0	2	2.40	.72
World Languages	1	1	0	0	2.20	—

Participants received 15 scores from Pearson Incorporated several weeks after submitting their portfolios. These scores corresponded to the 15 rubrics included in edTPA subject-specific handbooks. Each rubric has five levels, labeled one to five, and each of the three tasks is assigned five rubrics. In addition, the evidence used for generating scores is specific to the task. For example, the planning task depends on lesson plans and the planning commentary, while the instruction task depends on video clips and instruction commentary. Although rubrics vary slightly between subject areas, they generally assess the same performance expectations. A brief description showing sources of evidence and general performance expectations for each rubric is presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Summary of Performance Expectations and
Sources of Evidence for edTPA Rubrics

Task	Sources of Evidence	Rubric Performance Expectation
Planning	Lessons Plans Planning Commentary	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learning targets build on each other 2. Activities aligned with learning targets 3. Knowledge of students to plan instruction 4. Activities to teach academic language 5. Multiple assessment to monitor learning
Instruction	Video Clips Instruction Commentary	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Positive classroom environment 7. Students engage with subject matter 8. Candidate deepens student engagement with subject matter 9. Use of subject-specific pedagogy 10. Candidate proposes specific improvements to instruction
Assessment	Student Work Samples Assessment Commentary	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Analysis of assessments for whole class and individuals 12. Feedback provided to students 13. Students use feedback to revise 14. Evidence showing student use of academic language 15. Candidate proposes specific steps for whole class and individuals

Most edTPA scores across subject areas were similar, with three exceptions. Portfolios in secondary science scored somewhat higher in comparison to other subject areas, while portfolios in visual arts and world languages scored somewhat lower in comparison to other subject areas. Table 2 summarizes mean scores across the 15 rubrics by subject area.

The initial analysis of edTPA scores produced interesting results, especially when comparing subject area performance. However, the purpose of the case study was to compare similarities and differences between high-scoring and low-scoring portfolios as a way to identify strategies for earning points.

The first step for identifying strategies was to rank all 74 portfolios according to their individual mean scores calculated across the 15 edTPA rubrics. Descriptive statistics showed an mean score of 3.12 and standard deviation of .45. The maximum mean score was

3.9 and the minimum score was 1.8. Ranking portfolios by average scores showed that five graduates and five undergraduates comprised the top 10 scores, while six graduates and four undergraduates comprised the lowest 10 scores.

Analysis of high-scoring and low-scoring portfolios was further narrowed to the top five and bottom five portfolios. The top five portfolios showed an average rubric score of 3.82 with a standard deviation of .08. The bottom five portfolios showed an average rubric score of 2.14 with a standard deviation of .22. Results comparing high-scoring and low-scoring portfolios are shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Comparison of High-Scoring and Low-Scoring Portfolios

	N	M	SD	Maximum	Minimum
High-Scoring	5	3.82	.08	3.9	3.7
Low-Scoring	5	2.14	.22	2.4	1.8
Total	74	3.12	.45	3.9	1.8

Once five high-scoring and five low-scoring portfolios were identified, they were analyzed for similarities and differences. Although each portfolio included unique features, some trends were observed which could be translated into strategies for earning points on edTPA rubrics.

General Strategies

Minimum number of lessons. Although candidates may include up to five lessons in a portfolio, the minimum is three. Most high-scoring portfolios included the minimum number of lessons, which likely reduced the amount of time spent planning and teaching for edTPA and perhaps increased the amount of time available for writing commentary.

Maximize commentary page limits. High-scoring portfolios also showed more pages of commentary. The average number of pages included in the planning commentary of high-scoring portfolios was 10.8. Alternatively, the average number of pages

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of planning commentary for low-scoring portfolios was 5.6. This pattern of high and low page counts repeated across the instruction and assessment commentaries.

Concise writing. Including the maximum amount of commentary pages was insufficient for earning a high score. Effective commentary writing needed to be analytical and concise, with frequent reference to lesson, video, and student work sample evidence. For example, one top scoring portfolio included the following description, “The central focus for this learning segment is, ‘Students will identify and describe patterns in multiples of 5 and 10 to count and add within 1000.’” Alternatively, one low-scoring portfolio showed, “The students learn and apply the vocabulary of different clothes that we are learning while using and practicing this with a variety of exercises, both spoken and written, in class.”

Strategies for Planning

Carefully authored learning targets. Attention to carefully authored learning targets was another characteristic of high-scoring portfolios. Effective targets included one measurable objective and the targets showed a clear connection to one another between lessons. For example, the learning target from a high-scoring portfolio showed, “Students will count by 5s and describe two patterns in multiples of five.” However, learning targets for low scoring portfolios were complicated, non-measurable, and disconnected from one lesson to the next. The learning target for one low-scoring portfolio showed, “Know that art is a form of communication; Learn about the how [sic] sculptor Auguste Rodin’s life and work; Use gesture line to communicate motion or emotion.”

Linking learning targets to academic language. Referencing learning targets to address academic language requirements was another feature common to high-scoring portfolios. This meant including one to three subject-specific words and identifying the verb in the target as an element of the language function. For example, one candidate wrote, “the language function ‘describe’ is present in all three of my lessons, and is embedded in all three learning targets.”

Strategies for Instruction

Scripted interactions. Characteristics of high-scoring instruction videos showed candidates asking specific questions of students, often working from a script to structure interactions. Successful candidates referenced the learning target often and used simple activities like think aloud, show of hands, and pair share to engage students in self-assessing their progress toward meeting the target. The proportion of talk time between candidate and students was at least equal on high-scoring videos. When direct instruction was shown, it was broken into two to three minute segments and followed by opportunities for student talk, in the form of review or formative assessment.

Activities to emphasize learning targets. Low scoring portfolios showed candidates neglecting the learning target, or delivering direct instruction without student interaction. In addition, questions presented to students were unstructured and disconnected from the learning targets. Video evidence also emphasized classroom management and showed minimal student interaction with subject matter.

Strategies for Assessment

Pre-assessment and post-assessment. Most high-scoring portfolios included a pre-assessment and post-assessment as bookend activities to the lesson sequence. Inclusion of the pre- and post-assessment model provided a structure for analyzing the performance of individuals and the whole class. For example, some portfolios calculated gain scores or in some other way showed change in student understanding over time using pre- and post-assessment results. However, in order to maximize the benefits of this method, results of the assessment needed to be thoroughly described in the assessment commentary.

Assessment and work sample. Another method shown in high-scoring portfolios was use of the assessment as the student work sample. Although edTPA portfolios permit separation of the assessment from the work sample, candidates may choose to combine these requirements. Overlapping the assessment with

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the work sample increased opportunities to connect planning and assessment tasks, as well as analyze outcomes across the lesson sequence. Similar to the strategy of including the minimum number of lessons, using the assessment as the work sample decreased the number of portfolio elements that candidates had to manage.

Characteristics of feedback. High-scoring portfolios also included handwritten feedback on the work sample, along with a response from the student showing corrections. Additional qualities of the feedback described student performance in terms of strengths, weaknesses, and identification of resources for getting help. Low scoring portfolios showed one or two of these features, such as check marks indicating a correct response or a question posed to the student that was left unanswered.

Conclusion

Some of the strategies identified from the portfolios in this case study can be connected to educational theory and practice. For example, carefully authored learning targets, pre- and post-assessment, and feedback are accepted teaching practices. Alternatively, other strategies are disconnected from educational theory and practice, such as maximizing commentary page limits, scripted interactions, and overlapping the assessment with work samples. These strategies are meant to earn points and simplify portfolio assembly. Although they do not violate edTPA administrative policies, they are misaligned with the goal of improving new teacher effectiveness.

It is unsurprising that some confusion and misalignment surrounds edTPA since various stakeholders have been involved in its design and implementation. One example of this is the use of financial incentives by the federal government to encourage states to adopt edTPA as an accountability measure. Another example is the fee candidates are charged to have their portfolios scored. Yet another example is the shift to more restrictive policies in terms of candidates receiving help for assembling their portfolios before submitting them for scoring.

The use of edTPA for teacher preparation reform should also

be considered in comparison to research dealing with high-stakes testing in general. There is evidence to show that linking performance to consequences can result in negative outcomes. There is little reason to believe that teacher candidates, or their instructors, will avoid all of the deleterious effects associated with high-stakes assessment. Indeed, analysis from the case study presented here suggests that strategies indicative of test-taking shortcuts may be helpful in earning points on edTPA.

Many involved in teacher education find the circumstances surrounding adoption and implementation of edTPA disconcerting. Those involved in teacher preparation at liberal arts institutions may find these circumstances entirely misaligned with their beliefs about schooling and education. Nevertheless, reform of teacher preparation is well underway and edTPA will surely be a significant part of this process.

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