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Responsibility, Creativity, and the Arts of Language

November 19–22
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Postconvention Workshops
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The 4th CEE summer conference will occur in collaboration with the International Federation for the Teaching of English (IFTE), an organization comprising the national English teaching organizations of IFTE member nations. It will take place July 6–9, 2015, at Fordham University’s Rose Hill campus in the north Bronx, New York City.

As a member of IFTE, CEE is pleased to host the 2015 IFTE Conference in conjunction with our biannual summer meeting. Keynote speakers include Ngaire Hoben, University of Auckland, New Zealand; Hilary Janks, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa; Mary Kalantzis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, US; and Ernest Morrell, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York, US.

The conference begins with a cookout and plenary session Monday, July 6, at 5:00 pm, and concludes Thursday, July 9, at 3:00 pm. In addition to keynote speakers, there will be nearly 100 roundtables, workshops, discussions, and panel presentations. On Thursday, in addition to a full offering of sessions, there will be a special-interest strand for graduate students.

The registration fee includes six meals, access to all sessions and speakers, and all materials. Housing in the Fordham University dorms is available at a reasonable price.

Find more information, including how to register, at http://ncte.connectedcommunity.org/IFTE/conference

Registration deadline: June 30, 2015
Housing deadline: June 22, 2015
The Scarlet U—Lisa

It came out of nowhere one day after school.

“Dr. Scherff, can I see you for a moment?”

No one likes to hear those words from their principal, but I couldn’t think of anything I had done wrong (well, I did show parts of All the President’s Men to my Global Perspectives class, but films and documentaries are very closely tied to the curricular themes we study, and we were starting a unit on Technology and Surveillance).

I was unprepared, however, for what he did say. “I want to let you know about something before it comes out.” Uh oh, this is not good.

“The VAM scores came out, and yours was Unsatisfactory.”

I almost laughed. Seriously. But inside I was experiencing both a slow and fast motion range of feelings: incredulity, hilarity, embarrassment, confusion, anger.

“I want to show you . . .” (from here it gets a little fuzzy because I was beginning to process the implications of this “score” so the quote I attribute to him may not be 100 percent accurate). “They used 67 of your students and came up with unsatisfactory. I have been in your room. You are a great teacher. This makes no sense to me.” Me either, I thought.

That was around November 13, 2014, a few days before I left for the NCTE Annual Convention. It was also the middle of the second quarter of a four-quarter school year. In other words, I was told I was a rotten teacher and I still had well over 100 days to “teach.”

Since that time (it is now February) I have had time to think—and get really angry. That unsatisfactory VAM completely canceled out my Highly Effective principal rating to give me an overall rating of Unsatisfactory for the year.4 Yes, you read that correctly. I am completely, totally, 100 percent UNSATISFACTORY. That. Has. Serious. Implications.
Can I get pink-slipped? (Teachers no longer have tenure but are on annual contracts.) Will I get involuntarily transferred? Will I be assigned a collegial coach to help me improve my teaching (as I think our contract reads)?

I am angry at the system. I am angry at what measure they used, the FCAT (a ridiculous “reading” test that my students are forced to take and pass to get a high school diploma), which is the main criterion to judge my 180 days’ worth of teaching. I am angry that even though I taught the same 67 kids as some of my colleagues, some of these colleagues got additional measures to add to, and improve, their overall VAM score. And, I am angriest at myself that while I was in teacher education I was upset with VAM, but I didn’t get angry enough to speak out, like I am now.

There are a lot of resources to assist us in writing and speaking out, such as the American Statistical Association (ASA), journal articles, blogs, and position statements (our colleagues Anne Whitney and Melanie Shoffner have both published reaction statements, for example). In 2014 the ASA published the “ASA Statement on Using Value-Added Models for Educational Assessment,” which outlined several key points of concern that relate to teacher naming/shaming. One is particularly relevant:

The measure of student achievement is typically a score on a standardized test, and VAMs are only as good as the data fed into them. Ideally, tests should fully measure student achievement with respect to the curriculum objectives and content standards adopted by the state, in both breadth and depth. In practice, no test meets this stringent standard, and it needs to be recognized that, at best, most VAMs predict only performance on the test and not necessarily long-range learning outcomes. Other student outcomes are predicted only to the extent that they are correlated with test scores. A teacher’s efforts to encourage students’ creativity or help colleagues improve their instruction, for example, are not explicitly recognized in VAMs.

The point above is pertinent to the students used in my VAM score. First is the test used—the FCAT. After taking it as sophomores, students never take it again (unless they do not earn the “cut” score). So, the predicted growth for my students on this test is—in essence—useless after this year. There is no model that later takes into account the types of tests my students generally aspire to do well on for college admission, such as the SAT and ACT. Second, I did not teach the FCAT. I taught my students the Cambridge curriculum because they were taking a Cambridge program English course, a curriculum that is rigorous and demanding.

However, what concerns me most (and Leslie focuses on this) is the rapid growth of and belief in this model. Teachers are scared to speak out
for fear of losing their jobs. I am lucky in that I have this platform as coeditor from which to speak.

To close my section, I want to share excerpts from the “Top Ten Bits of VAMmunition” from Audrey Amrein-Beardsley’s site Vamboozled.com. The Arizona State University professor offers “research-based reasons . . . that all public school educators should be able to use to defend themselves against VAMs.” If you have not visited her site, I urge you to do so. I also encourage you to read her 2014 book *Rethinking Value-Added Models in Education: Critical Perspectives on Tests and Assessment-Based Accountability.*

1. VAM estimates should not be used to assess teacher effectiveness. The standardized achievement tests on which VAM estimates are based, have always been, and continue to be, developed to assess levels of student achievement and *not* levels of growth in student achievement nor growth in achievement that can be attributed to teacher effectiveness. The tests on which VAM estimates are based (among other issues) were never designed to estimate teachers’ causal effects.

2. VAM estimates are often unreliable. Teachers who should be (more or less) consistently effective are being classified in sometimes highly inconsistent ways over time. A teacher classified as “adding value” has a 25 percent to 50 percent chance of being classified as “subtracting value” the following year(s), and vice versa. This sometimes makes the probability of a teacher being identified as effective no different than the flip of a coin.

3. VAM estimates are often invalid. Without adequate reliability, as reliability is a qualifying condition for validity, valid VAM-based interpretations are even more difficult to defend. Likewise, limited evidence exists to support that teachers who post high or low value-added scores are effective using at least one other correlated criterion (e.g., teacher observational scores, teacher satisfaction surveys).

4. VAM estimates can be biased. Teachers of certain students who are almost never randomly assigned to classrooms have more difficulties demonstrating value-added than their comparably effective peers. Estimates for teachers who teach inordinate proportions of English Language Learners (ELLs), special education students, students who receive free or reduced-price lunches, and students retained in grade are more adversely affected by bias. While bias can present itself in terms of reliability (e.g., when teachers post
consistently high or low levels of value-added over time), the illu-
sion of consistency can sometimes be due, rather, to teachers being   
consistently assigned more homogenous sets of students.

5. Related, VAM estimates are fraught with measurement errors that negate their levels of reliability and validity, and contribute to issues of bias. These errors are caused by inordinate amounts of inaccurate or missing data that cannot be easily replaced or disregarded; variables that cannot be statistically “controlled for”; differential summer learning gains and losses and prior teachers’ residual effects that also cannot be “controlled for.”

6. VAM estimates are unfair. Issues of fairness arise when test-based indicators and their inference-based uses influence some more than others in consequential ways. With VAMs, only teachers of mathematics and reading/language arts with pre- and post-test data in certain grade levels (e.g., grades 5–8) are typically being held accountable. Across the nation, this is leaving approximately 60–70 percent of teachers as VAM-ineligible.

7. VAM estimates are non-transparent. Estimates must be made transparent to be understood, so that they can ultimately be used to “inform” change and progress in “[in]formative” ways. However, the teachers and administrators who are to use VAM estimates accordingly do not typically understand the VAMs or VAM estimates being used to evaluate them, particularly enough so to promote such change.

8. Related, VAM estimates are typically of no informative, formative, or instructional value. No research to date suggests that VAM-use has improved teachers’ instruction or student learning and achievement.

9. VAM estimates are being used inappropriately to make consequential decisions. VAM estimates do not have enough consistency, accuracy, or depth to satisfy that which VAMs are increasingly being tasked, for example, to help make high-stakes decisions about whether teachers receive merit pay, are rewarded/denied tenure, or are retained or inversely terminated.

10. The unintended consequences of VAM use are continuously going unrecognized, although research suggests they continue to exist. For example, teachers are choosing not to teach certain students, including those whom teachers deem the most likely to hinder
their potentials to demonstrate value-added. Principals are stacking classes to make sure certain teachers are more likely to demonstrate “value-added,” or vice versa, to protect or penalize certain teachers, respectively. Teachers are leaving/refusing assignments to grades in which VAM-based estimates matter most, and some teachers are leaving teaching altogether out of discontent or in protest.

This last sentence is what hits home. I do not want to leave the classroom, but I can. I have a doctorate, 11 years in teacher education, and a strong research/writing background. I have options. I am lucky. What about my colleagues with 15 years of experience and a bachelor’s degree? What will they do?

Labeling in Teacher Education—Leslie

Recently, the Department of Education has put out new regulations for teacher education reporting. These regulations, as they are currently written, will require states to rate teacher education programs at one of at least four levels ranging from low-performing to exceptional. These ratings will be based on data indicators, including employment and retention of graduates, outcomes on surveys of graduates and their employers, professional accreditation or state program approval, and student learning outcomes.

This move seems to be based on the assumption that teacher educators—and the states that approve teacher education programs—are not doing due diligence in assuring high quality. The only data that have been presented to support the notion of low quality in teacher education are that states rarely close down or provide other consequences to teacher education programs that are not performing well. In fact, the idea here is that “high performing” is a status for teacher education programs that has not previously been defined.

Unfortunately, this move by the feds amounts to yet another unfunded mandate, with no funding provided to states or institutions to develop systems to collect these data. I’m particularly interested in how my state—Wyoming—will handle these new reporting requirements, where we have a small state agency that licenses educators and oversees our one educator preparation program at the University of Wyoming.

I’m also concerned about the impact of labeling programs based on student achievement data when those data are typically based on a single test, often designed to measure students’ achievement on state standards. Those tests are not designed to be informative about teachers’ instructional practice, nor were they designed to tell us anything about the teacher education program that produced the teacher. What happens when a teacher graduates from a program that is not typically tested, but test scores in other
content areas are traced back to that teacher, and to that teacher education program? An example that is particularly relevant in rural areas such as Wyoming is agricultural education. Should our program and my program colleagues in agricultural education be evaluated based on K–12 students’ scores in reading and writing? K–12 students’ scores in mathematics? Should our art education program be evaluated by students’ scores in mathematics? What kind of statistical parsing will be required to even develop a connection between the available test scores and specific programs?

All of this comes in the face of the American Statistical Association’s (ASA) statement regarding the use of value-added models (VAM). ASA notes that standardized test scores “do not directly measure potential teacher contributions toward other student outcomes” and reminds us that VAMs “typically measure correlation, not causation.” This hesitation on the subject of VAMs from knowledgeable statisticians suggests that states and programs should take care not to base high-stakes decisions, even partially, on VAMs. It also raises the question of other factors that might play a role in student test scores, factors that are not within the control of teacher educators or teachers. Some of those factors that come to mind include the following:

- Do K–12 students come from families and communities that value the forms of reading and writing typically tested on standardized assessments?
- Do K–12 students have mastery of English, or is it a second language for them?
- Are K–12 students enrolled in schools and school districts that provide materials, textbooks, and facilities that are safe, up-to-date, and of high quality?
- As mentioned above, are K–12 students being tested in areas that match up with each of the teacher preparation programs that an institution may offer?
- Is the new teacher supported through mentoring or a similar type of induction program in their school or district, or is the new teacher left to muddle through on his or her own?
- What is the class size of the classes being taught by the new teacher? A new teacher with 5 sections of 15–20 students each will have a different experience than a new teacher with 7 sections of 35 students each; the students in those classes will also have different experiences.
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› Does the new teacher have a master’s degree? A minor in a specialty area? An additional endorsement in teaching English Language Learners or in teaching literacy skills?

› Is the new teacher teaching within his or her licensing area, or is he or she teaching occasional courses outside of their teaching area?

It should be expected that differences in these factors, and others, will produce differences in outcomes. How will those be accounted for in the new regulations, and what high-stakes impacts will accrue, for students and for programs, on the basis of these factors?

Alternatively, I would like to see policymakers, states, and institutions begin considering the development of capacity in both teachers and teacher education programs, as an alternative to labeling and rating those teachers and teacher education programs. Teaching, and the development of preservice and inservice teachers, is a complex, difficult work that cannot be reduced to simplistic indicators such as test scores. Teacher education programs are under attack in a time when state funding for higher education has been cut drastically. Educator preparation programs have less funding than in the past but are expected to be able to do more and do it better. A focus on capacity building in teacher education programs would ensure that resources were available to support new teachers and the programs that produce them to ensure high-quality coursework, top-notch faculty, effective practicum and residency experiences, and ongoing mentoring and support through the first years of teaching.

We may not be able, ultimately, to control the regulations placed on us by the Department of Education and in turn by our states. We should, however, be tracking the impact of these regulations and the use of VAM evaluation models on the population of individuals choosing to pursue education as a field. As I like to say to our incoming first-year students, when you choose teaching as a profession, you have chosen the one profession that makes all other professions possible. In addition, as a profession we must help all of our constituents understand what it is that we do, so that the results of these regulations can be placed in a context that makes sense.

In This Issue

This issue provides readers with several different ways to see and value the contributions that English language arts teachers make to schools, their own work, and students. In her article, “‘Looking Back I Can See’ Literate Tensions and Changes: A Veteran Teacher’s Cross-Contextual Analysis of His
Literate Life,” Julie F. Schappe uses change epistemology (CE) as a framework through which to view the development of expertise by an experienced English teacher. This perspective will perhaps aid in the development of an understanding of capacity building in teachers, developed as it is through a Literacy Life Story Interview of Ed Kent. Schappe develops her findings around themes that emerged in her analysis of Ed’s teaching history, with the sense that his pedagogy focused on developing skills and dispositions in his students by positioning himself as a learner alongside them: “changing students’ anticipated literacy practices happened over time, not overnight or in one carefully designed lesson. Transforming authoritative expectations to a participatory classroom culture required that he deconstruct his status as a knower in his students’ eyes. By intentionally silencing himself and marginalizing his literate status, he opened a void in classroom meaning making. He created opportunities in his pedagogy for students to reconstruct themselves as valued knowers and literate meaning makers” (pp. 229–230).

Naomi Watkins and Jon Ostenson also focus on teacher decision making and teacher expertise in their article, “Navigating the Text Selection Gauntlet: Exploring Factors That Influence English Teachers’ Choices.” This article reports the results of a survey in a western state that asked teachers to explain what influences their text choices. Findings indicate that teachers expressed a high level of autonomy in text selection and widespread use of literature anthologies. When dissatisfaction with their level of decision making was expressed, it frequently had to do with the approval process required by the school district for the adoption of new texts. The authors also report on the influence of contextual factors, including aspects such as a “grade-level tradition,” connections to other courses, and the purpose for using a text. As the authors suggest, these contextual factors carry grave importance for English teacher educators: “We cannot simply present our English teacher candidates with the principles that ‘should’ guide their decision-making without helping them understand the nature of the challenges they will face and how to potentially navigate those challenges” (p. 265).

Our Extending the Conversation section features Gholnecesar Muhammad’s article, “‘Inducing Colored Sisters of Other Places to Imitate Their Example’: Connecting Historic Literary Societies to a Contemporary Writing Group.” In this thought-provoking piece, Muhammad articulates the development of a literacy collaborative for African American adolescent girls, with an eye toward replicating practices adopted by the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia and other similar societies established in the mid-1800s. Muhammad outlines the features of the literacy collaborative and presents the benefits it evoked for participants, including the reading of
Opening the Conversation

mentor texts, freedom to write openly without censorship, and uninterrupted writing time. Muhammad ends her article with a sample of a participant’s poetry and the following statement: “The girls in this study began to think of their identities as writers and connected to a wider and ongoing lineage of authors” (p. 296).

Notes

1. To determine a teacher’s overall rating, our district counts the administrator’s rating (all of the classroom observations over the course of a year) 50 percent and the VAM score 50 percent. My VAM score was -10.86; 16.42 percent of my students “met [growth] expectation.” This does not mean that only 16.42 percent improved. It means that only that percentage met the growth model (i.e., projected score on the FCAT) predicted by the state.

2. Even though all of us (history, science, etc.) teach the same core students and we “share” responsibility for their growth, my evaluation was only based on how much they met the “projected” growth according to the VAM model. Other teachers had additional, optional tests—ones not required by the state—used in their VAM, resulting in a range among us, from my Unsatisfactory, to another’s Needs Improvement, to another’s Highly Effective.

References

