UC Berkeley
The CATESOL Journal

Title

The Evolution of a Practicum: Movement Toward a Capstone

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7672c01n

Journal

The CATESOL Journal, 27(2)

ISSN

1535-0517

Authors

Avineri, Netta

Martel, Jason

Publication Date

2015

DOI

10.5070/B5.36065

Peer reviewed

NETTA AVINERI
JASON MARTEL
Middlebury Institute
of International Studies
at Monterey

The Evolution of a Practicum: Movement Toward a Capstone

In this reflective piece, we discuss changes made to the practicum at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey (MIIS), a professional graduate school that offers MA degrees in TESOL and TFL. We begin by providing a historical perspective of the practicum as it has evolved in relation to other exit mechanisms. Then, we provide a rationale for moving toward a Dual Capstone Model, in which the former practicum was elevated to capstone status. Finally, we reflect upon the new Practicum Capstone in relation to ongoing issues of washback, rubrics, and feedback, providing our particular disciplinary perspectives on these aspects. Throughout the piece, we highlight how teacher identity can be fostered through a balanced approach to both structure and agency. This discussion of practicum- and program-level changes highlights the importance of responsiveness to evolving student needs through thoughtful deliberation about curricular changes over time.

Introduction

According to Richards and Crookes (1988), the practicum in MA TESOL programs represents "the major opportunity for the student teacher to acquire the practical skills and knowledge needed to function as an effective language teacher" (p. 9). Given this claim, it is vital that teacher educators not only take into account current research on teacher learning while designing the practicum, but also position the practicum as a core course within the MA TESOL program. In other words, to legitimize the "teaching" nature of a MA TESOL degree, the development of teaching proficiency should be a principal programmatic goal. In this reflective piece, we chronicle a recent, substantial change to the practicum at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey (MIIS), a professional

graduate school that offers MA degrees in TESOL and Teaching a Foreign Language (TFL), as well as in other internationally focused disciplines. The change involved formalizing the practicum as part of the program's exit mechanism by elevating it from standard program offering to capstone status (see below for a definition of a capstone/exit mechanism). A convergence of circumstances, including shifting assessment priorities in the faculty and the arrival of three new faculty members who brought additional perspectives from the fields of applied linguistics, education, and linguistics motivated this process.

As part of this introduction we consider it important to include a brief statement of positionality, for our unique backgrounds and professional identities have shaped our actions as faculty members during the processes of change chronicled in this reflective essay and our perceptions of these processes as we constructed the present reflections. Netta is trained as an applied linguist and linguistic anthropologist, and she is deeply interested in language and social justice, heritage language socialization, interculturality development in teacher education, and service-learning. Her socioculturally focused research and pedagogical interests emphasize classrooms as cultures, the emergent nature of interactions, scaffolding, and the importance of ongoing, structured reflection. Anthropology's focus on emic (insider) perspectives shapes her approach to the practicum, as she especially emphasizes student teachers' own views of their teaching practice and progress. A former secondary school French teacher, Jason comes from a curriculum and instruction background, having worked in a K-12 second language licensure program as a university supervisor. He is versed in the use of standards of professional practice and performance assessments in preparation programs, both of which shape his approach to curriculum design. In particular, he is interested in the role that identity construction plays in the development of future language teachers.

It goes without saying that all TESOL/TFL faculty members' professional identities shaped the changes we describe here, as elevating the practicum to capstone status was a collaborative decision-making process. The faculty come from a variety of backgrounds, with interests in assessment, curriculum design, language program administration, second language writing, and sociolinguistics, to name a few. As authors of this paper, we consider it important to note that the views we express are our own and are not necessarily representative of those of our fellow TESOL/TFL faculty members.

To begin, we explain the practicum's place within the TESOL/TFL programs' exit mechanisms before the change in practicum status occurred. Then, we explain various ways in which the practicum's

curriculum was modified in accordance with its elevation to capstone status. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on our experiences to date with the newly minted Practicum Capstone, posing questions for consideration to our colleagues in the field at large.

History

Generally, MA TESOL programs have exit mechanisms—that is, culminating demonstrations of learning that provide an opportunity for synthesis across program courses and assure the faculty that a teacher candidate possesses adequate skills, knowledge, and dispositions to be an effective member of the teaching profession. Program exit mechanisms vary from comprehensive examinations, to theses, to portfolios. Teaching proficiency figures variably into these mechanisms, whether directly (e.g., observation reports of teaching events and/or lesson plans that were actually taught during student teaching placements), or indirectly (e.g., a research paper or lesson plans that were designed according to SLA/L2 education principles but that were not actually taught). The notion of direct and indirect representations of teaching proficiency is similar to that of direct and indirect representations of language proficiency; a metalinguistically focused multiple-choice test can give one an indirect idea of a learner's communicative competence, whereas a face-to-face conversation involving negotiation of meaning can provide a more direct picture. It should be noted that both direct and indirect representations can make valuable contributions to teacher candidates' learning. Furthermore, the fact that student teachers "borrow" a practitioner's classroom on a short-term basis means that the ratio of direct to indirect representations of teaching is inherently limited.

The MA TESOL exit mechanism at MIIS has witnessed two major shifts in the past 20 years, the first of which is explained in Lynch and Shaw (2005). In the fall of 1993, MA TESOL and TFL students approached the faculty and asked them to consider changing the program exit mechanism from a set of written comprehensive exams to a portfolio assessment. In line with their commitment to authenticity—that is, fostering a correspondence between the exit mechanism and the demands of real-life teaching and scholarship in applied linguistics—the faculty quickly responded, developing a list of artifacts to be included in the new "Portfolio" and criteria for evaluating the components (see Lynch & Shaw [2005] for a complete list of portfolio components and evaluation criteria). This new exit mechanism was first implemented in the fall of 1994 and remained in place, with periodic modifications, until the spring of 2014. In various iterations of the Portfolio, a number of components were evaluated, including a

revised course project, novel curricular materials (e.g., syllabi, assessments), and teaching journal entries. However, using the definition of indirect representation of teaching presented here, it could be argued that teaching proficiency was largely represented indirectly in this assessment.

In later years, the faculty and students became overwhelmed by the excessive time and effort involved in both assembly and evaluation of the Portfolio. In addition, the faculty began to assess the authenticity of some of its components (e.g., an SLA position paper). Furthermore, they were concerned that the Portfolio was strongly overshadowing the practicum, resulting in more student effort put into the former than the latter. Last, there was an increase in the number of students in the program who came directly from their undergraduate studies with little teaching experience, resulting in shifting expectations around teaching proficiency. Therefore, during the 2013-2014 academic year, the faculty engaged in a redesign of the program's exit mechanism.

As a result of the faculty's deliberations, it was decided that the Portfolio would be split into two independent yet interrelated capstone courses: an Applied Linguistics Capstone and a Practicum Capstone, both of which were intended to carry equal status in the curriculum. The former preserved a revised course project as its central deliverable (i.e., formally evaluated/graded assignment), while the latter incorporated a variety of teaching-focused documents into a central, streamlined deliverable, which will be described in detail below. The elevation of the practicum from standard course to capstone status and its placement alongside the Applied Linguistics Capstone were intended as symbolic statements, projecting to students (and to the field) that a MA TESOL or MA TFL from MIIS requires that teacher candidates possess a sophisticated knowledge of topics in the field of applied linguistics and that they are equipped to handle the demands of language teaching.

What's in an Exit Mechanism?

Before it became a capstone, the practicum course contained components present across many institutions, as outlined in Richards and Crookes (1988). These included, in various combinations across semesters:

- A survey of key topics related to language teaching (e.g., L1/L2 use, objectives writing, classroom management), presented by the instructor and by students;
- Case study on a particular learner's development;

- Critical-incident analysis;
- Development of job search–ready documents, such as a teaching philosophy statement;
- Engagement in professional-development activities (e.g., attending a conference);
- Formal observations of teaching from course instructor on two occasions;
- Guest speakers on various topics (e.g., effective interviewing, job searches);
- Observations of mentor and other teachers in student-teaching placement contexts;
- Peer coaching (outside class);
- Reflective journal writing;
- Reflective study focused on aspects of one's teaching explored throughout the semester;
- Sessions during which students showed videos of their teaching and received feedback from peers and the course instructor;
- Student teaching hours in sites on and off campus.

Practicum course sessions—approximately 45 hours per semester—occurred on campus at MIIS. Student teaching placements were carried out at MIIS (e.g., in the Institute's Intensive English Program) and in elementary, secondary, and tertiary institutions across the Monterey Peninsula (e.g., Monterey Peninsula College, Pacific Grove Adult School, North Salinas High School). Placements were identified based on students' career goals and mentor teacher availability.

The capstone version of the course builds upon the practicum's previous focus on process and product and retains many of the essential activities and documents outlined above. However, core activities and documents were consolidated and integrated into a central deliverable called the Teaching Practice Dossier (TPD). Modeled after portfolios in K-12 licensure programs, the TPD is a professional website (usually created using Wix or WordPress) on which student teachers showcase a variety of professional documents (a job-ready CV, lesson plans, and a teaching philosophy statement) and mobilize evidence in the form of artifacts demonstrating their teaching competency in domains that are outlined in standards of professional practice, such as focus on learners, planning, assessment, and so forth (see CCSSO, 2011). While the former Portfolio contained a model lesson plan, the TPD incorporates two lesson plans that are actually taught during teacher candidates' student teaching placements. These lesson plans, as well as all other documents in the TPD (e.g., the teaching

philosophy statement), undergo several stages of revision in consultation with the Practicum Capstone instructor and classmates, reflecting the process-oriented and collaborative nature of the course.

The inclusion of multiple genres and a process-based approach mark the TPD as a portfolio-style assessment, yet the term *portfolio* has been avoided in order to make a clear distinction between the TPD and the program's former Portfolio exit mechanism. The TPD incorporates all elements into one streamlined, culminating product designed to embody students' future professional identities, to be used as a marketing tool for the job search if desired. Moving from a regular course to a capstone has therefore necessitated that the faculty create consistency and standardization across different sections, which involves in-depth discussions and making explicit one's own views about the capstone. However, each professor has the freedom to make the capstone his or her own within the existing framework. See Appendices A through C for an overview of the MA TESOL and MA TFL curricula, including the new Practicum Capstone, a diagram of required Practicum Capstone components, and sample TPDs, respectively.

Moving to a Dual Capstone Model

The move to a Dual Capstone Model has had a number of implications, including shifts in the overall program, the educational culture, and the affective state of the students. Both the Practicum Capstone and the Applied Linguistics Capstone are opportunities for process and product, with a focus on synthesis and collaborative revision. For both courses, two sections are offered simultaneously by different faculty members, which can involve coordination between the two professors and sections. In the Applied Linguistics Capstone, students choose to revise a research, curriculum design, or assessment project completed in an earlier course. Whereas the Practicum Capstone focuses on the development of teaching knowledge, skills, and attitudes with some focus on genre conventions (e.g., teaching philosophy statement, résumé), the Applied Linguistics Capstone focuses on genre conventions (e.g., revision of an original research paper, curriculum report), audience design, and the development through time of a written product that connects to students' interests and professional goals.

The overall changes to the Portfolio exit mechanism reflect a culture shift to a Dual Capstone Model. Now that the Applied Linguistics Capstone has only one product (whereas the previous Portfolio had multiple products), the students' stress has been distributed differently. In some ways, the Applied Linguistics Capstone may still be seen by

current students as the "real" exit mechanism, leaving out the TPD, as reflected in their discourse about the two courses and students' practical prioritization of their work throughout the semester. For example, there may be an evolutionary connection to the Portfolio as the program's exit mechanism; the Applied Linguistics Capstone may seem more like a traditional graduate school deliverable than the TPD; or the Practicum Capstone may be seen as "easier" than the Applied Linguistics Capstone. It should also be noted that students take at least one other course in their final semester, which involves juggling many responsibilities simultaneously.

Reflections

Redesigning our program's exit mechanisms has compelled us to engage as a faculty in meaningful conversations about what constitutes effective teaching and how teaching can be cultivated and assessed. These conversations have brought to light the richness of experiences and diversity of perspectives among us. They have also compelled us to grapple with a central question related to program identity: Are we predominantly an applied linguistics program or a teaching program? Can we be both at once? In the spirit of reflective practice (Bailey & Springer, 2013; Zeichner & Liston, 1996), and in order to participate in the thoughtful dialogue about the practicum rekindled by this special theme section, we briefly summarize a few of our ongoing conversations in the paragraphs that follow. From time to time, we break away from using second-person plural to include personal reflections.

Washback

Washback refers to changes in curriculum and instruction that correspond with shifts in assessment practices (Green, 2014). Because the course has run for only a year, we do not yet have much evidence related to modifications to the curricula of the courses that precede it. There has been some evidence of positive washback, however. In my (Jason's) first-semester Introduction to Observation course, I shared with my students the observation form I use when I teach the Practicum Capstone, highlighting the importance of being aware of criteria of effective teaching practice from the very beginning of the program. We anticipate more changes in the future, once the two capstones have been offered on more occasions and by different faculty members.

Above all, we consider it vital as we move forward to reevaluate the opportunities for practice teaching afforded to our teacher candidates *before* they enroll in the Practicum Capstone. Like many other programs, the Practicum Capstone remains the first significant opportunity in our program for many of our students to gain practical

teaching experience (Richards & Crookes, 1988). This state of affairs invites the following question: Is it ethical for us to perform a culminating assessment of our candidates' teaching proficiency in such a high-stakes fashion if our program does not offer more substantial opportunities for teaching practice beforehand? Our candidates engage in microteaching in their Principles and Practices (first semester) course, create several lesson plans throughout the span of the program (e.g., in their Curriculum Design, SLA, and Structure of English classes), and participate in peer teaching across the curriculum. However, we are concerned about building more on-the-ground teaching experiences into the program earlier on.

Along these lines, I (Jason) struggle with the number of hours currently required for the Practicum Capstone. Since I worked for a licensure program in the past, in which extended (e.g., approximately 125 hours) student teaching placements is the norm, I feel inclined to vouch for incorporating more teaching into our program before the Practicum Capstone. I have, however, come to appreciate the richness and complexity inherent in a smaller number of teaching hours, which I think can be effectively mined for deep learning experiences. This being said, maybe 10 hours could be sufficient, if they are *quality* hours, to build a strong identity foundation as a language teacher? Maybe more is not necessarily better? If a brand-new student teacher manages to learn a great deal during his or her 10-hour placement, do I feel less guilty subjecting him or her to a high-stakes, culminating assessment such as the TPD?

Rubrics

Among our colleagues, there are diverse perspectives about the use of rubrics with the TPD, that is, rubrics outlining criteria related to effective teaching practice. One perspective is that rubrics can be used principally as material for discussion and/or self-assessment; that is, throughout and at the end of the semester, students can place themselves along a teaching proficiency spectrum, and during end-of-semester conferences they can identify three aspects of their teaching they would like to build upon and three aspects they would like to improve ("3 & 3"). The instructor can also identify "3 & 3" and then use the rubric to guide the discussion of feedback. This identification of "3 & 3" can also supply useful material for the instructor later on, when he or she writes letters of recommendation or provides references. Self-assessments such as these provide an opportunity for *global/holistic* reflection while also including the *details* of effective teaching practice as demonstrated throughout the semester. This macro-micro

emergent approach allows for building students' confidence and for engaging in ongoing reflective practice based upon their own views of their teaching, in tandem with the instructor's assessment, guidance, feedback, and mentorship.

From another perspective, rubrics can be used to articulate parameters for passing or failing the class. For example, it could be decided that students must receive ratings of "minimally meets expectations" or above in order to pass, in essence setting a "cut score." Using a rubric in this fashion can not only help to ensure clarity regarding expectations for success in the course, but it can also indicate to students that there is a base level of teaching proficiency they must demonstrate to receive credit for the course and proceed into the professional world. Furthermore, setting the cut score (i.e., the score above which indicates a passing grade) on the lower end of the continuum makes space for students who come to the course with limited or no teaching background to succeed. In other words, students who are new to teaching are able to pass the class if they can demonstrate that various facets of teaching proficiency are at least "on their radar screens." For example, the ability to differentiate activities along the lines of product, process, and/or content (Tomlinson, 2014) may be slowly emerging in a student teacher's lesson planning but not yet present in his or her real-time instructional practice. It should be noted that a practicum professor can set a cut score for passing the course while also giving formative feedback using the rubric throughout the course. In this way, a cut-score approach to using rubrics and the process/growth-oriented approach described above can be complementary.

I (Netta) remember one student who struggled throughout the practicum with confidence and with truly seeing herself as a language educator. She consistently viewed her knowledge and skills from a deficit perspective, engaging in ongoing critique before, during, and after her lessons. During our end-of-course conference, I asked her to think of three aspects of her teaching that she believes she does well and three aspects she would like to improve. It was very difficult for her to think of three positive aspects of her teaching, but I encouraged her to do so in order to build up a more optimistic perspective on her abilities before the end of the semester. She ultimately was able to accomplish this, and she saw it as a very useful exercise in her professional development. I then provided her with my "3 & 3" and proceeded to use the rubric categories and spectrum as a tool for discussion of her teaching development. I believe that space to explore one's own views of one's current abilities as well as areas for growth can ultimately be empowering and can complement the use of a rubric during mentoring sessions.

Feedback

In elevating the practicum to capstone status, conversations have emerged about various approaches to giving feedback on students' teaching as an essential aspect of the mentoring process. One option has focused primarily on students' completing a preobservation form in which they ask for guidance on particular aspects of their teaching. Then, during observations, the instructor can start with a blank Word document that is then filled with details of the lesson and associated feedback as it is happening in the classroom interactions. The feedback is shaped by both the students' requests for guidance and essential aspects of effective pedagogy. This approach, with historical precedents in language education, is anthropological, emergent, and inductive, in that it does not start with a priori categories but allows for the emergent nature of classroom cultures to guide the feedback that is provided. Another option that has been implemented consists of having the instructor provide students at the beginning of the course with an observational document based on standards of professional practice (e.g., the InTASC standards [CCSSO, 2011]) and then typing his/her feedback under these predetermined categories.

During class sessions in which students' teaching videos are reviewed and feedback is given, the students and instructor can engage in a peer feedback process that is used by many in the department, called "riffing." Riffing comes from jazz improvisation, in which various musicians' contributions depend on the structure and flexibility provided by others' performances. In this approach, the student presents background information and lets everyone know what he or she would like feedback on before watching the video. Afterward, in giving feedback, the fellow students begin with a few positive aspects (as a way to build up the student's sense of confidence) and then move to a phase of constructive feedback that emerges in an organic manner. This emergent feedback process allows students to build upon one another, because something that one student says may spark a new idea in another student. During this process, the student who shows her video takes notes and cannot respond (unless to clarify) and then "mirrors" back what she heard (without providing rationale or explanation). This approach, which resonates with similar approaches used in language and teacher education for many decades, can create a less defensive atmosphere, an opportunity for in-depth reflection, and engaged listening. It also has the potential to allow those who shared feedback to feel that they have been heard, and it is a tool for socialization into providing constructive feedback. Patterns emerge, as opposed to there being a set structure in advance.

I (Netta) recognize that some students may prefer what they see

as a more structured feedback protocol. In particular, I remember an occasion during which two students preferred a different approach to providing and receiving peer feedback. During a "riffing" session after we watched her teaching video, one student asked her classmates to first share areas for improvement and then to share the things she did well. The second, during the mirroring part of the session (meant to focus on what she learned during the feedback session), responded defensively to each point that her classmates had brought up. During my end-of-semester discussion with each of them I highlighted that working within a framework over which they have little control and letting themes organically emerge is a skill they would need to develop during their professional lives. This experience has provided me with issues to consider in terms of balancing structure and agency within various feedback protocols.

Conclusion

Reenvisioning our practicum course over the past two years has been an exciting and challenging endeavor. Overall, we believe that the changes that we have made have paved the way for a stronger, more relevant program and a more robust set of exit mechanisms that effectively assess existing teaching proficiencies, embodying our ethos of responsiveness to evolving student needs as we deliberate changes to our curriculum over time. Furthermore, we hope the changes we have made have set the stage for minting beginning language teachers who leave our program with a sense of confidence and optimism—that is, with strong, confident identities. With a goal of balancing structure and agency, we hope to foster a disposition among our students that not only acknowledges but embraces emergent complexity.

As is evident in the many points of reflection described above, we fully recognize that our faculty's efforts represent only the beginning of an ongoing process whose ultimate goal is to foster increased teaching proficiency in our teacher candidates. We eagerly look forward to the conversations we will continue to have among ourselves and with colleagues in the field about assuring the practicum's place as a central pillar in MA TESOL and TFL programs.

Authors
Netta Avineri is visiting professor in the TESOL/TFL Program at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey. She teaches linguistics and education courses and is the Intercultural Competence Committee chair. Her research interests include heritage language socialization and service-learning. She is the CATESOL Steinbeck Chapter coordinator and The CATESOL Journal *book review editor.*

Jason Martel is an assistant professor of TESOL/TFL at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, where he teaches courses in language pedagogy and assessment and directs the Institute's Summer Intensive Language Program (SILP). His research focuses principally on foreign language teacher learning, with an emphasis on identity construction.

References

Bailey, K., & Springer, S. (2013). Reflective teaching as innovation. In K. Hyland & L. C. Wong (Eds.), *Innovation and change in English language education* (pp. 106–122). New York, NY: Routledge.

Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). (2011). *InTASC model core teaching standards: A resource for state dialogue*. Washington, DC: CCSSO.

Green, A. (2014). *Exploring language assessment and testing: Language in action*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Lynch, B., & Shaw, P. (2005). Portfolios, power, and ethics. *TESOL Quarterly, 39*(2), 263-297.

Richards, J. C., & Crookes, G. (1988). The practicum in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly, 22*(1), 9-27.

Tomlinson, C. (2014). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Zeichner, K. M., & Liston, D. P. (1996). *Reflective teaching: An introduction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum.

Appendix A
MA TESOL and MA TFL Curricula at MIIS as of Fall 2014

MA TESOL
Semester 1
- Principles and Practices of Language Teaching
- Introduction to Classroom Observation
- Language Analysis
- Sociolinguistics
- Educational Research Methods

Semester 2
- Curriculum Design
- Structure of English
- Language Assessment
- Second Language Acquisition
- Electives

Semester 3
- Practicum Capstone
- Applied Linguistics Capstone
- Applied Linguistics Research
- Electives

For more information, see:
http://www.miis.edu/academics/programs/tesol/curriculum

MA TFL
Semester 1
- Principles and Practices of Language Teaching
- Introduction to Classroom Observation
- Language Analysis
- Sociolinguistics
- Educational Research Methods

Semester 2
- Curriculum Design
- Pedagogical Grammar or Language
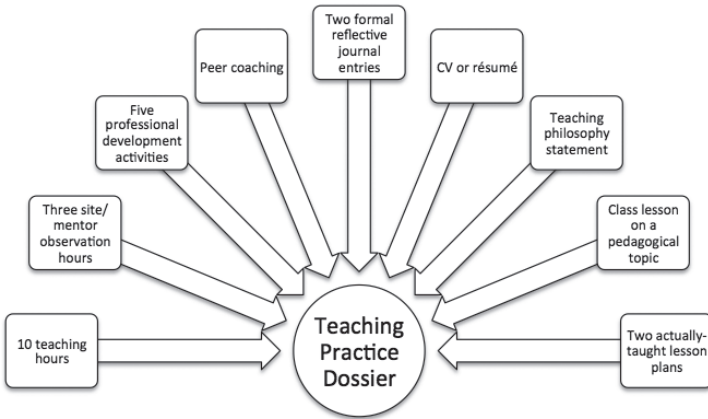- Language Assessment
- Second Language Acquisition

Semester 3
- Practicum Capstone
- Applied Linguistics Capstone
- Languages

For more information, see:
http://www.miis.edu/academics/programs/tfl/curriculum

Appendix B
Practicum Capstone Components

Two formal reflective journal entries

Peer coaching

CV or résumé

Five professional development activities

Teaching philosophy statement

Three site/ mentor observation hours

Class lesson on a pedagogical topic

10 teaching hours

Teaching Practice Dossier

Two actually-taught lesson plans

Appendix C
Sample TPDs

- http://adammcgarity.wix.com/teachingdossier
- http://sites.miis.edu/daurie/