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## ASSESSING THE PRACTICUM: THE NIE EXPERIENCE

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**Abstract:** Assessment of the practicum is always a problematic procedure in any teacher education institution. Those involved in this activity are normally charged with administrative as well as professional problems and issues. This paper examined the professional issues of why assess the practicum, what to assess in the practicum and how to go about it to realize maximum effects in the development of professionals in the teaching profession. In the past, the National Institute of Education (NIE) used an evaluation form called the Assessment of Performance in Teaching (APT) to help supervisors ensure reliability in assessing student-teachers (STs) performance under their care. The past model involved a lot of lecturers as supervisors and each time they visited the STs they used the APT forms together with verbal as well as written reports to formatively and summatively evaluate STs' performance, together with reports and assessments carried out by the school cooperating teachers (CTs). Presently the numbers of students aspiring to become teachers have increased to such an extent that it becomes no longer feasible for lecturers to supervise all STs adequately. Hence a new Partnership Model evolved, involving the school personnel more in the assessment process. This paper documents the changes as efforts to improve practicum assessment need to be continuously improved and reflect upon progressively.

### Introduction

Assessment of the practicum is always a problematic procedure in any teacher education setting. The practicum appears in many different forms, some called it field placement, internship, clinical placement or practice teaching/teaching practice (eg. Toohey et al., 1990). Many of the problems surrounding assessment of the practicum arise out of the inability to reconcile traditional assessment practices with the type of learning outcomes that might be expected from the practicum. University education concentrated on knowledge-based assessments that enable comparisons and ranking of students. But clearly the assessment of the practicum concentrated on the areas of applying knowledge and principles to practice. Here the outcomes are performances of the students in the field requiring a different set of criteria in the evaluation. Granted that in this area of performance assessments, a little reliability of the measures and interpretation of the results are lowered. Nevertheless, we always try to minimize the errors as much as and as far as possible. At the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore, the practicum is considered as sine qua non during teacher preparation. Hence the assessment of the practicum plays an important role in the teacher training programmes.

This paper specifically will examine the rationale for assessing the practicum i.e. why assess the practicum, what to assess in the practicum and how we, in the NIE go about to assess the practicum to realize maximum effects in the development of professionals in the teaching profession.

### Rationale for Assessing the Practicum

When talking about the rationale of the practicum, we are looking into the purposes that justify the means. Here there are several goals and purposes that need to be considered to answer the question: Why assess the practicum?

- To give students insight into the world of work and helping them integrate in the real-life situations of a practicing teacher (Au Yeung et al., 1993; Mann & Schlueter, 1985)
- To develop professional skills (Langdon & Judd, 1994; Au Yeung et al., 1993)
- To develop interpersonal and social skills (Au Yeung et al., 1993)
- To link and apply theory to practice (Langdon & Judd, 1994, Turney et al., 1982)
- To enhance prospects of employment (Au Yeung et al., 1993; Mann & Schlueter, 1985)
- To ascertain and certify teaching qualification.

It can be seen from the above that the assessment of the practicum need to emphasize attitudinal and other affective characteristic changes more than the acquisition of knowledge or technical skills. These require new sets of criteria and new and innovative ways of assessment, emphasizing performance rather than knowledge – a demonstration of the competencies and skills so necessary in a real-life situation. In short the assessment of the practicum serves to ascertain the extent to which one can teach or perform as a teacher in the real-life situation.

### **What to Assess in the Practicum?**

In the past, in determining what to assess in the practicum or what aspects of the performance should be considered, five distinct models can be identified in the literature:

- The attendance model
- The work history model
- The broad abilities model
- The specific competencies model
- The negotiated curriculum model

At the National Institute of Education, we develop the eclectic and progressive model, combining some of the good features of the models identified above. Progressive in the sense that, we continuously review and improve upon current practice to take into consideration present demands and future challenges. In this respect, we can also say that our model is a dynamic one.

The *attendance model* (eg. Knowles, 1991; Garland & Cole, 1985) do not formally assess the practicum but satisfactory completion requires that the student attends and the workplace supervisor attests that the performance was satisfactory. Although no criteria may be provided as guidance on what constitute satisfactory. Grading may be on a pass/fail basis but completion is always noted in the students' transcripts.

The *work history model* (eg. Au Yeung et al., 1993; Boud et al., 1985) aims at assisting the students to document significant tasks that they undertook and reflected on. This is achieved by students keeping a log book or journal and the emphasis appears to be keeping records of the tasks undertaken. There is no real attempt to observe or assess a range of teaching performance.

The *broad abilities model* (eg. Winter, 1994) demands that students provide regular reports which must document and analyse their involvement in specific aspects of work such as planning, administration and provision of services. The assessment criteria should concentrate on the ability to analyse events and practices, to evaluate and make defensible judgements and to relate theory to practice. Although an improvement over the two previous models, a potential problem here is that

the abilities may be specified so broadly that the assessor has difficulty in determining what constitutes sufficient evidence of satisfactory performance.

The *specific competencies model* (eg. Wren, 1982; Grady, 1988) identified the key roles and tasks expected of practitioners. Here considerable effort is expended in organising the practicum to ensure that the full range of opportunities for practice can be offered to the students. Here performance is assessed in the workplace and may be graded as satisfactory/not satisfactory or rated on a scale to provide a grade.

The *negotiated curriculum model* (eg. Knowles, 1991; Cox, 1982) is a structured approach assessed through learning contracts derived from adult learning theories. All aspects of the practicum are negotiated between the workplace supervisor, the educational supervisor and the student. These aspects include the learning objectives, the activities to be undertaken, the personnel from the workplace and educational institutions, the kinds of evidence of achievement that students will produce, the criteria to be used for assessing the outcomes and the personnel concerned with the assessment – the assessors and assessees.

Although many institutions have chosen to adopt one of the models above over time, there appear to be clear advantages in combining elements from the different models. At NIE, we combine several of the above to full advantage taking into consideration the context that we operate in, limited by the constraints we encounter, without sacrificing quality in terms of validity, reliability and practicality.

### **The NIE Experience in the Assessment of the Practicum**

The NIE experience in the assessment of the practicum take into consideration the complexity of skills that student-teachers (STs) need to demonstrate and employ multiple assessments to assess student-teacher's performance in a variety of instructional circumstances. This allows the ST to demonstrate his/her competence in using different classroom structures/strategies like whole-class instruction, small-group instruction, individualised instruction as well as group or individual project work and in teaching different content areas or different groups of students in different streams.

Initially, the assessment procedure requires matching STs and assessors. The STs are the preservice student-teachers who satisfied the basic necessary qualifications for teacher training. At the Diploma in Education (Dip Ed) programme, students normally would have finished GCE 'A' (General Certificate of Education, Advanced) level qualifications. At the Post-Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programme, students would have been graduates from universities at the first degree level (i.e. Bachelor Degrees in many different fields of study) or some with higher degrees. The STs receive the necessary forms to fill out after initial briefing by the Practicum Unit of the NIE, where all the necessary prerequisites for coping as a teacher are delineated to the participants. The schools involved in the training process are contacted and STs are assigned to schools, preferably the ones nearer to their homes. In the schools, the more experienced teachers are selected as Cooperating Teachers (CTs) to guide the STs during their Teaching Practice period. CTs also fill out evaluation forms (APT forms), each time they observe the ST's teaching. A teaching practice period normally consists of a block of about 10 weeks attachment to the schools. During this period, the lecturers are expected to visit the STs for at least three times to observe and assess their practice teaching. At NIE, lecturers according to their specialization, are assigned to manage several STs, as supervisors/assessors. Although as assessors, the work here is more of a facilitative nature.

Once an assignment is made, a mutually agreeable time for the assessment is set. The STs who earlier on had some school experience as a matter of exposure, would fill up most of the forms

given them during the briefing. The supervisor/assessor (Lecturer from NIE) is expected to arrive early enough to have time to acquaint himself/herself with the school administration as well as discuss with the STs, what he/she has prepared for the lesson to be observed.

The first assessment activity that brings the ST and the supervisor/assessor together is the pre-observation conference. This provides an opportunity for the two parties to review the preparedness of the STs and for the supervisor/assessor to gain more of the sense of the context of the class and the lesson to be observed. This conference focuses primarily on issues that relate to how the ST has planned and organised the lesson, how he/she becomes familiar with the students' background knowledge and experiences and how these have influenced his/her lesson planning and execution decisions.

Following the pre-observation conference is the actual classroom observation, either in a class period or a double period for the completion of a certain lesson. The supervisor/assessor takes careful notes of what the ST and students say and do. The assessors are guided by the Assessment of Performance in Teaching (APT) form where five processes are examined namely; the planning, developing the lesson, communicating, managing and evaluating; with each of these processes having sub-categories delineating the competencies to be observed. (See Appendix 1). These notes need to be objective and descriptive and the APT form has these categories to be filled. After the observation, the assessor looks over the notes and identifies any area(s) that need clarification during the post-observation conference, immediately after the observation. In this conference, the ST reflects on how the lesson went for the class in general and for specific students. The STs are advised on how they can overcome deficiencies and adjust accordingly during the next visit and improve along the way. The post-observation conference completes the interactive stage of the assessment cycle of performance in teaching.

In this way, the supervisor/assessor (the lecturer) and the assessee (ST) interacted for at least three times during the Practicum period. Preferably, the assessor would choose and target his/her visits to cover the main curriculum areas that the ST specializes in. This cumulative record of achievements of the STs are filed and at the end of the Practicum, assessors are given a summative evaluation form to be filled. This summative evaluation form has categories for the NIE supervisor/assessor and also CTs' evaluations of the ST. The NIE supervisor then would honed his/her professional judgement, after taking all the evaluations into consideration and arrive at a final grade for the ST under his/her care. As the practicum is the sine qua non of teacher preparation, it also has the highest 'weightage' in the total assessment of the ST who is also assessed on content knowledge in subject areas and in pedagogical areas, including the use of IT in education.

Over the years, the number of student-teachers that NIE takes in each year increase tremendously. It has become physically impossible for lecturers who are supervisor/assessors to handle this large numbers. Now, NIE in cooperation with the school system have come up with the partnership model. The modus operandi of this partnership model is to enable the CTs in the school more say in the assessment of the STs. This by right should be the case because when on attachment to the schools, the CTs observe the STs more times and interacted with them in more ways than one. However, as this joint venture develops, there are several problems that arises that need to be addressed effectively to ensure success. The partnership model demands that we should relook our evaluation of STs more effectively, without sacrificing quality in terms of validity, reliability and practicality.

As far as validity is concerned, performance of the STs in the real life situation on the skills that are expected of the teacher are those that a teacher need to function effectively are there. Hence, there is little likelihood that the validity issue could be violated. This is of prime importance and it is

there all the time, because we ensure that. The reliability issue becomes a little more formidable because now, we have more people handling the assessment. Hence this need to be taken into account more thoroughly to ensure quality in the produce of quality and effective teachers of the future. On closer examination, it is found that the APT form should be more user-friendly meaning all who have access to the form must have a good understanding of what it entails. A survey sent out to NIE supervisors also showed that there were differences among lecturers in the interpretation of the categories in the APT form. Some of the items in the APT are not really clearly understood by all NIE supervisors/assessors. Added to this now, we have a larger group to contend with. Hence the APT form should be simplified and made more explicit and applicable with more detailed explanations of the categories involved, at the same time developing a more reliable scoring rubric to ensure less discrepancies (less errors) in the measurements that are produced. On closer examinations, the APT forms actually contain many areas (too many) that are subjected to subjective judgements. To be able to apply more extensively, at the same time ensuring higher reliability, the categories need further improvements to reduce this subject element, thus improving comparability.

### **Suggested Improvements**

1. The first category on the APT form is the 'planning' section. Here the competencies that one wish the STs to demonstrate are what do they/we want students to achieve during the lesson and how the STs propose to go about doing this to ensure that the students have learned. Essentially, this is an area demanding STs organise and plan content knowledge for effective student learning. Hence this category actually is concerned with how the teacher thinks about and organise content to maximise learning. This thinking is evident in how the ST organises and plan instruction for the benefit of the students under his/her care. Here it is proposed that the six gradings A to F for each of the 5 categories be reduced to five A, B, C, D, & F denoting Superior, Very Good, Good, Fair and Poor. The four competencies be reduced to three essential ones, using performance terms expressed with action verbs that most people can understand and apply:
  - Delineating learning objectives
  - Demonstrating content knowledge
  - Determining & using appropriate procedures, media, material
2. The second category is the 'developing the lesson' section. Here the competencies should concentrate on how STs go about introducing the lesson, developing and ensuring that it is stimulating, motivating and encouraging. This category like all the other categories should also incorporate some of the new initiatives of Education in Singapore. The competencies deemed essential here are:
  - Arousing interest
  - Encouraging participation
  - Stimulating thinking
3. The third category is the 'communicating' section. There is no denial that communication is essential for learning to take place, in fact effective communication is one of the categories of the Marzano's taxonomy (Marzano, 1993). The competencies here should reflect what effective communication can be demonstrated in the lesson:
  - Explaining and informing
  - Questioning, listening and responding
  - Demonstrating effective communication, verbal as well as written

4. The fourth category is the 'managing' section. Here what this mean is managing behaviors of students to maximise learning in the lesson. This category also should emphasise time on tasks, involving students in active learning. The competencies here should elicit those related to engaging students in conducive environment as participants in the instructional process. Hence suggested categories are:
  - Establishing rapport (T-S & S-S)
  - Managing individual/group work
  - Managing time
5. The fifth category is the 'evaluating' category. This category is often misunderstood. It should be evaluating during the lesson, not out of the observable behaviours because that would have rendered this category invalid! The competencies deemed necessary are:
  - Using and giving feedback verbally
  - Monitoring student understanding
  - Encouraging self-evaluation

Each of these above categories are further qualified with detailed scoring rubrics to ensure reliability in scoring and grading of student performance. The actual performances that the STs are able to demonstrate during the lesson that he/she handle. This is substantiated by the pre-observation and post-observation conferences. The supervisor/assessors be they from NIE or from the schools should have a good understanding of the application of this new APT form and how it is to be applied. It is further recommended that a separate training session(s) be organised to train personnel, be they be NIE lecturers or school teachers in the assessment of the practicum.

### **Teacher Characteristics**

The 'teacher characteristics' section of the APT form when examined in-depth is deemed to be inadequate to bring out these other essential characteristics of an effective teacher. Hence it is suggested that this section be expanded to incorporate those characteristics that really reflect effective teachers and that this should be developed on a developmental basis. Meaning, since assessors/evaluators observe STs on a prolonged basis, usually observing their lessons in more than three occasions, the STs demonstration of these characteristics could be charted on a graphical fashion to indicate the demonstration of these characteristics over time. Essentially, the graphs should at the end of the practicum indicate some developmental pattern going northwards, rather than southwards. (See appendix 2).

### **Grading Procedure**

At present, STs are graded on a three-point scale: Pass with Distinction, Pass and Fail. Those STs about to receive the two extreme grades – distinction or fail – normally will have an independent moderator to assess him/her independently to confirm or disconfirm the grading before a final grade is awarded to the ST. In the Singapore context, grades mean a lot to individuals and STs often compare grades that they receive. Similarly superiors in the school administration also look into grades to distinguish teachers and often rank them on some basis when certain recommendations to higher positions or staff developments programmes are concerned. To help in the overall process of this kind of 'discrimination' grades must be justifiably supported and defended. There are many occasions, people thought that in the Practicum, a pass/fail categorisation is enough. But in the unique, Singapore situation, further distinctions are often necessary. Hence it is essential that we pay particular attention to this kind of sensitivities.

Over time, supervisors/assessors and also CTs who are partner-supervisors/assessors felt strongly that there are STs who perform well enough to merit another category in the pass domain. These are the STs whose performance is not only pass but higher than pass but at the same time not really as good as to merit distinction or the excellent mark of excellence. They are certainly higher than just pass! But not reaching the excellent category. In other words, the recommendation here is for a four-grade points category: Pass with Distinction, Pass with Credit, Pass and Fail. Some people argued that smaller number of categories may ensure higher reliability. But reliability is a matter of reducing errors in judgement. Smaller number of categories tend to exaggerate rather than reduce errors in judgement. Hence a four category should be preferred for more reliable measures and a more reliable measure, meaning more meaningful interpretations made, has more likelihood of being valid at the same time.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The assessment of the practicum constitutes an essential and significant part of the total assessment of a student-teacher. In fact this assessment really reflects the real-life situation of a teacher. Hence it is rightly placed in the teacher training programmes, meriting higher 'weightage' than the rest of the elements in initial teacher training. The importance here need not be further emphasised. Because of its importance, assessors need to take this essential part of the professional development of a teacher more seriously. Hence there is a call for indepth training in this aspect of training initial teacher training. Time spent on training here is always worth the effort, time and the energy involved. Unless people are convinced that you have developed a valid and reliable system of assessing quality and effective teachers, they are not going to take this matter seriously. Hence this is a very essential element in any initial teacher training programme. Let us together make this effort more effective each time when faced with this necessary and essential element of the professional development of an effective teacher.

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