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## **“We do investigate ourselves”: figurative assessment practices as meaning-making in English education**

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**“We do investigate ourselves”: Figurative assessment practices as meaning-making in  
English education**

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Alecia Beymer is a doctoral student in Curriculum, Instruction, & Teacher Education at Michigan State University. Her research is focused on literacies formed by space and place, considerations of the interconnected resonances of teachers and students, and the poetics of education. She currently teaches courses in poetry, disciplinary literacies, and secondary English teaching methods in the College of Education at MSU.

**Abstract**

In this study of microteaching in a secondary English methods course, we intentionally stray from normative assessment practice, instead asking pre-service teachers to provide feedback on their peers' microteaching using assessment practices designed to orient them *figuratively*. The term "figurative" refers to "figurative language": the bringing together of multiple, seemingly unrelated things, through associative configurations, and placing them side-by-side in order to reorient thought towards new or unexpected meanings. This study reframes assessment, not as a means of collecting data on what students have learned from a given lesson in order to evaluate and augment learning, but instead figuratively, as providing opportunities to expand and imagine ways of meaning-making through and with assessment (Fendler 2012). We examine in detail four modes of figurative assessment practices through which we sought to surprise and disorient students, producing new and different kinds of responses to microteaching that went beyond normative feedback practices.

**Key words:** assessment, microteaching, figurative language, metaphor, English Education, teacher education.

“We Do Investigate Ourselves”: Figurative Assessment Practices as Meaning-Making in  
English Education

Unless we're actively procreating we're acting metaphorically.

--Sarah Manguso, “The Movement of a Caravan Over the Landscape”

In this study we intentionally strayed from normative assessment practices. We asked pre-service teachers in our secondary English methods course to provide feedback on their peers' microteaching using assessments designed to orient them *figuratively* rather than representationally. We use the term 'figurative' as in “figurative language”: the bringing together of multiple, seemingly unrelated things, through associative configurations, and placing them side-by-side in order to reorient thought towards new or unexpected meanings. Feedback on microteaching lessons is typically designed to provide the teacher candidate with clear and detailed information on the “effects of teaching” (MacLeod 1987) in order to develop “more realistic perception[s] of...teaching” (Wilkinson 1996, 213). This approach is illustrative of what Fendler calls “representational thinking”, which assumes “that knowledge can be represented by educational practices like teaching and curriculum” (Fendler 2012, 8). Representationally, feedback is provided to pre-service teachers on their microteaching in order to realistically represent how their teaching was perceived. This kind of thinking privileges clarity in language for the production of knowledge; feedback implemented in this way then should be as clear as possible about what happened during the microteach in order to learn from the experience.

This mode has long been the norm for providing feedback on microteaching, and indeed of much assessment in education generally, with its technocratic impulse of gathering data with an eye towards improving teaching in the name of greater productivity in line with best-

practices. In the wake of recent reforms geared towards standardization and assessment, this is a movement felt locally and globally (Rubin, 2011). Tracing testing programs attached to recent standardization efforts around the world (The United States, Australia, Central and Eastern Europe, China, Israel, and Japan), Cimbricz & McConn (2015) find that assessment plays a greater role than ever before in shaping classroom teaching practices in detrimental ways; Dymoke argues that as a result of such reforms “teachers are now less prepared to take creative risks in terms of text selection, classroom activities and outcomes to be included in assessed portfolios of work.” (p. 396) Moreover, while these reforms were initially directed at K-12 students, an emphasis on standardization and assessment has made its way into teacher education programs as well. Riley (2015) finds, for example, a shift “in teacher education and professional development from valuing students’ communities and lives toward a more narrow focus on increasing test scores and preparing students for the workforce” (p. 151). Diamond, Parr, & Bulfin (2017) confirm that this is not limited to the context of US teacher preparation but rather is part of a “global discussion” about teacher education, one “characterised by an emphasis on the practical or technical competencies of classroom teaching as demonstrated in visible and measurable behaviours” (p. 269). It is evident that in the U.S. and elsewhere, in K-12 classrooms and university teacher prep programs, standardization and assessment increasingly shape teacher practice.

In our own teacher preparation course located in the US, we felt this pressure of standardization in the form of microteaching activities and assessments. Microteaching has its roots in the Stanford Teacher Training program, envisioned as a process to give teachers more practical experiences teaching in the classroom (Politzer, 1969). The idea is that teaching could be distilled into particular pedagogical moves and that these ways of teaching could be

simulated, practiced, mastered, and diffused into varied classroom spaces (Johnson and Arshavskaya, 2011). Microteaching thus acts as an in-between space of learning to teach that acclimated preservice teachers to situated endeavors in schools. We often see microteaching and feedback now framed as a space for immediate and constant assessment through critical reflection of individual teacher practice (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). These assessment practices still act in keeping with the move towards an efficiency model of teaching noted, one that assumes that the representational ways we make sense of the teaching encounter impact teacher learning in clear and measurable ways.

The problem with this approach is that it's limited in its ability to account for the rapidly changing demands of teaching in contemporary, pluralist contexts. The complexity of these contexts calls for a reworking of educational norms, and in particular of assessment, given its increased emphasis in this era of standardization and accountability reforms. This study reframes assessment then, not as a means of collecting data on what students have learned from a given lesson in order to evaluate and augment learning, but instead figuratively, as providing opportunities to expand and imagine ways of meaning-making through and with assessment. As Johnson and Arshavskaya (2011), note, microteaching is itself an enactment of a metaphorical endeavor: "the learners aren't real, the subject matter isn't real, and the context in which the microteaching is carried out isn't real" (p. 169). In a figurative approach, Fendler explains, "knowledge is not represented by educational practices [like assessment]...figurative education expect[s] that I will have my way with a text, and make of it what I will...[it] evokes meaning in me" (Fendler 2012, 9). Put differently, considering microteaching through a figurative lens we consider how assessment may constitute a form of experiential and expository play, as students come to make meaning of a microteaching lesson through the process of exploring and assessing

it. By providing students with a variety of multimodal and metaphorical approaches of assessing lessons, we explore the varied ways students engage with assessments to make meaning and produce new and different knowledge of themselves and their peers.

The urgency of this move is reflected in a found poem written as part of an assessment for the methods course this past spring, by one student, Rochelle. She wrote: “I am / with all those who need a different kind, now / it is not only a question: / the conversation is necessary”. We agree with Rochelle that the question of how to assess isn’t enough; a renewed conversation and more imaginative work in teaching and teacher education are urgently *necessary* if we’re to figure out just what might be possible. Helpfully ambiguous, Rochelle doesn’t name what *different kind* of assessment we need, but rather encourages the work of getting to it: “While there’s only so much you can do with it, the only way to find this out is to try / and / do everything.” We instructors, then, set out to try and do everything with respect to assessment in the course, playing with form and approach and purpose in asking students to provide feedback on their peers’ work. For us this meant experimenting with the figurative as an alternative to more typical ways of assessing and providing feedback, in order to find out how we might conceive of assessment newly and differently “through, perhaps, another experience of the possible.” (Derrida 2005, 24)

### **Methods of inquiry**

This particular investigation came about in the context of a larger university study of aspiring English teachers in an undergraduate methods course. In the midst of teaching that year-long class, we generated a diverse assemblage of data: photographs, poems, found poems, ad-hoc interviews, our own lesson plans (by turns overwrought and under-baked), voice-memos, records of planning meetings, student-made collages. While co-teaching, we took turns observing each

other. Students also kept journals with prompts provided in and out of class times. The picture we want to paint here is one of messiness, in order to suggest the inevitability of mess, given our positions as both teachers and researchers. What we are interested in is how figurative thinking provides opportunities not to dwell on the challenge (or indeed, the impossibility) of assessment, but rather only asks us to be in the attempt of the thing. Metaphors welcome rather than resist multiple interpretations.

We turn our focus in this essay to one particular aspect of our data: microteaching assessment practices. As teacher educators, we provided students with different forms of meaning-making in assessing peers' microteaches. We set out to facilitate moments that revealed rich and particular ways of making new sense of students' own understandings, as well as their peers' perceptions of, the microteaches. The assessments constituted figurative approaches to education in that they oriented students metaphorically towards microteaching lessons, seeking in assessing to make "evocative gestures [that]...like figurative language, may catalyze, spark, inspire, generate, move, provoke, and/or persuade" their peers (Fendler 2012, 9). Here's a brief list of figurative assessment practices used in the course:

- Writing erasure poems using found text
- Choosing and interpreting educational metaphors
- Answering abstract questions raised in the poetry of Pablo Neruda
- Creating Internet memes
- Describing everything absent from the lesson in an apophatic mode
- Collaging using mixed-media found material
- Photographing the lesson and captioning with vignettes
- Coining neologisms



- Gifting texts to peers

Across these assessments practices, we sought to surprise and disorient students in order to reconfigure understandings, producing new and different kinds of responses to microteaches that went beyond normative feedback practices.

### **Found figures: Assessments**

A / blank page being a form / of a map that is a kind of / mask missing a mountain  
/ or a mouth or a marble / pedestal from which the riddle / pours down and you  
know

-- Dan Beachy-Quick, "Apophatic"

By asserting that students only need feedback tethered to learning outcomes or standardized assessment instruments, teacher educators too-often negate the inherent complexities and ambiguities, the messiness and mysteries of teaching with human beings. We therefore set out to experiment with novel aesthetic and figurative ways of providing feedback on microteaching lessons in order to engage multiplicities embedded in interpretations of teaching and learning as a way of making space for those complexities. This rendering of knowledge through figurative assessments created opportunities for students to recognize multiple ways of being and becoming an English teacher. In what follows we selected four assessment practices from the list above to discuss in greater detail; these four provide some sense of the scope of our project and the promise of figurative assessments as alternative ways of assessing student work in teacher preparation contexts.

### ***Figurative photography***

In one assessment, students were asked to take a picture during the microteaching lesson and provide a written interpretation of it. The task built upon photo-elicitation strategies used in

qualitative education research, which “ask participants to take photographs in response to a question or prompt provided as a means to gain insight and to empower participants” (Richard and Lahman 2014, 5). We further asked on our prompt that students:

Try to attend as closely to the image as possible -- what is interesting to you about the picture? What do you notice about it? Why do you think you took this particular picture (think about angles, what and who is and is not in the picture, colors, etc.)?

In providing feedback this way, students took pictures that would seem to be common moments in the classroom -- of peers reading or discussing, or looking attentively at the teacher, or of a teacher speaking in front of the class. Although these pictures have a familiar quality to them, the intriguing aspect of producing this assessment emerged as teacher candidates answered the questions above; it was in the attending to the photograph, in the explication of the ordinary, that they examined and extended their own considerations of teaching practice.

[*Figure 1* near here.]

For example, in the image above, Kevin contemplated Ga-hui’s microteach, a lesson on Maya Angelou’s poem, “Still I Rise”:

Just as Angelou rises in her seminal poem, so does the understanding of poetry arise from tinkering, playing, reading, re-reading, and just *experiencing* the phenomenon. Desmond is questioning, Rochelle is pondering, Holly is reading, and Courtney is focused. Each person is determined to uncover some small truth about determination.

In this passage, Kevin builds on Angelou’s notion of rising and expands her metaphorical assertion to invite understandings of how we may engage with poetry -- tinker, play, read, re-read, experience -- as teachers and learners. From Kevin’s perspective, each of his peers depicts a particular form of engagement, even though many of their actions seem internal -- pondering,

questioning, focusing. It is through this insistence that Kevin enters metaphorical terrain, considering and determining that each student interacts with the poem in ways already performed and evoked within the text. This figurative engagement requires a detailed attention to the lesson, careful noticing that invites a consideration of student and teacher moves previously unthought.

### ***Apophatic description***

Across the figurative assessments, students developed new awarenesses of different perspectives on the microteaching lessons they assessed. On the next assessment, for example, students were asked to note what was *not* present in the lesson and how that absence might impact their view of it -- a practice inspired by apophatic theology, which seeks to approach the divine through negative descriptions. Stacy wrote on her apophatic assessment, "As students talk to each other in groups, their faces are not stoic. There is not silence. The students are not distant from their experiences nor the poem". This rendering of perspective helped Stacy think through how a lack of silence constituted a kind of closeness with the experience of the poem. We found her assessment poetic for the way it figuratively rendered her reading of the microteaching lesson. A statement like "There is not silence" gives one pause -- it gave us pause -- and more importantly requires translation on the part of the teacher receiving this as feedback. That is, noting the absence of silence does not suggest, necessarily, that there should've been silence in the lesson, nor does it mean that there shouldn't have been -- it instead leaves space for a multiplicity of interpretations.

During another student's microteach, Audrey wrote of the lesson, "There isn't writing with pencils on paper." In recognizing what is not present, preservice teachers began to unravel traditional measures of schooling. In this moment, we see Audrey positioning the lesson in her imagined world of school, but the recognition of learning does not take on its traditional form.

Negation asks us to imagine what is happening instead, or what could happen, and we begin to inhabit a place of possibilities. We offer this example because we think this is what metaphor may do: engage an awareness that permits us to reorient our thinking, sometimes filling that space with unimagined worlds. These assessments moved students around the issue of representation by asking them to render what didn't happen rather than what did during the microteach. In that way, they came to understand the lesson only indirectly and obliquely, which is to say, figuratively, as the teacher had to interpret the apophatic feedback and fill in the gaps themselves.

### *Nerudian questions*

Another assessment asked students to choose a poetic question from Pablo Neruda's *The Book of Questions* (Neruda 2001) that fit the microteaching lesson they observed, then provide a written explanation of their pairing. The results provided surprising understandings of the microteach. Josie, in her observation of Ariel's microteach about puns, for example, chose Neruda's question: "Where is the center of the sea? Why do the waves never go there?" In making sense of the question and the lesson, Josie noted:

It helped to have students go through puns themselves while also keeping the concrete background (asking what type it is would be a concrete answer, but asking them why it is funny could bring many different answers) which allows students to make meaning and teach themselves.

What we find interesting here is how the center and the waves are entangled, as Neruda's question suggests the uncertainty around how we recognize and locate the center. Within the question and response, the possibility of multiple and surprising "answers" gives some sense of the messiness of this uncertainty, evoking in considering all the different possibilities the

innumerable directions and sums of “waves.” Josie’s feedback urges a disruption of how we view the normative position of the teacher: the one at work in the center, the Nerudian creator of waves. Instead we are left with questions as to who or what constitutes the center (teacher, or students?) and how the making of meaning from something as personal as humor elicits waves from varied directions. The point, we think, is that in choosing and interpreting this question Josie re-oriented Ariel’s lesson beyond a representational frame and towards, as she puts it, one which “allows students to make meaning and teach themselves.”

### *Giftng*

A final assessment drew on the metaphor of the gift, the practice of gifting (Sameshima, Miyakawa, and Lockett 2017), as students were asked to gift a response to their peer’s microteach. We spend an extended portion of this essay discussing this assessment, as we think it constituted a particularly remarkable shift in the ways students were oriented towards their peers through assessment. The gifting response was not observational (e.g., “I saw you do X during the microteach...”) or evaluative (“You did Y well in the lesson”) but rather was framed to present a contribution, something useful, helpful, or meaningful for the microteacher to place side-by-side with the textual figures in their lesson, thus inviting opportunities for connective and layered interpretations. In her response to Morgan’s lesson, for example, Sam gifted Morgan the poem “Picture Puzzle Piece” by Shel Silverstein. Sam explained:

I chose this piece because I think it represents the openness of a bigger idea, a bigger picture. Specifically the last line: "Nothing has more possibilities / Than one old wet picture puzzle piece." In the same sense, the snapshots students have written have endless possibilities, and the pictures they brought in are only one part of the new piece they can now create. In the lesson, you [Morgan] had the students create something based on their

photo and based on their memories, but the two aren't necessarily aligned evenly.

Exploring why the students made the choices and the decisions they did in their pieces is so important, because it reflects exactly what these memories mean to them.

We're intrigued by these gifting assessments as ways of understanding figurative assessment contributionally, as offering something new and welcome, rather than representationally, as a mimetic reflection of what happened. It's not so much that Sam's gift illuminates the lesson for Morgan but rather that it offers an additional text for the lesson to be in conversation with, something Morgan might build on going forward as she folds the lesson into her future practice. Additionally, Sam's understanding of Morgan's gift attends to the possibilities of reflective practice. In conversing with a new text and Sam's interpretation of the text, Sam offers Morgan space to see something new or different about her lesson. In further understanding this moment, we feel the immediacy of gifting permeates the present, as well as the future, and begins the orientation of *thinking with*. We build here on "how arts-based and contemplative practices in research and teaching draw attention to the ability to see, and concomitantly act, on the potentiality of the present" (Macintyre Latta, as quoted in Sameshima, Miyakawa, and Lockett 2017, 46). Through this activity the "potentiality of the present" is illuminated by the collaborative and autonomous moments of gifting; the gift was dependent on what each preservice teacher noticed and that noticing was extended into the thing they gave over of themselves and of what they believed to see in another.

Another example of this practice occurred when Morgan gifted Lyndsay a song, one that Morgan had recently come to love:

I liked the text that you brought in, and that inspired the text that I am “gifting” you. I am choosing to gift you the song “Smoke Signals” by Phoebe Bridgers. I loved your idea of claiming happiness “right now”, so here is a text that I am happy with... right now.

Importantly, Morgan first identifies with the text that Lyndsay brought in and sees it as something to build on, to be *inspired* by. Morgan also points to one specific moment in the lesson and uses the language Lyndsay herself used: “claiming happiness right now”. The urgency of the present, how momentary and fleeting the connective act of gifting can be, gave Morgan an opportunity to look introspectively and examine a text that had invited her to claim happiness “right now”. By gifting, Morgan enacted the objective of Lyndsay’s lesson and simultaneously offered something meaningful as feedback. Expanding her interpretation of how the gift she gave offers aspirations for their future teaching approaches, Morgan continues:

I want to help my students become strong storytellers. We want to be able to learn how to communicate to others and express our ideas so strongly that our words can conjure memories in others, or at least, arouse similar memories or feelings that they already have. This idea also aligns with your lesson because once we come to understand texts and how they speak in different ways, we further understand writing and production of text, and we can then express our own selves further.

Gifting gives us space to offer up a text that shows what was conjured in us through participating in a lesson. As Morgan says, “we want to be able to communicate with others.” Gifting multiplies the possible communicative patterns we can have with each other, and in its enactment engages varied points of intersection which begin the associative endeavors of meaning-making. We see through the threads of the many things gifted an awareness of the potentiality that is the present moment, but we also see how these “gifts” amplify over time and over theme. Gifting is

how we continue conversations, keeping in mind the very human quality of teaching. We may all interpret a microteaching lesson differently, find ourselves compelled and inspired at different moments and by different moves. But in the space of the gift, we gather at a point of recognition and attempt “to think with an enlarged mentality” (Arendt, as quoted in Haraway 2016, 129).

We additionally find it compelling how conversations continued past peer-to-peer interactions and past time and space. For example, Danny gifted Ga-hui *The Bloody Chamber* (Carter 1990), which he details below:

I am gifting you the short story collection *The Bloody Chamber*, by Angela Carter. Your lesson was really interesting about how the context or setting of the story can influence the character and/or their actions. In this collection of stories, Carter revamps classic fairy tales such as "Beauty and the Beast," "Little Red Riding Hood," and "Puss in Boots" with psychological and feminist themes that at times really change how a lot of these famous characters behave. As a teacher, this would be a great resource for content that would pair well with character and point of view (Beauty and the Beast is told twice, through different characters).

Danny’s example invited me (second author) to recall a book of poems by Anne Sexton called *Transformations*, where the poet embeds and adapts fairy tales into her own experiences, a book which I in turn gifted to Danny. A year later, in another class, Danny read “The Gold Key,” a poem from that collection to the same preservice teachers; he stood in front of the class, glancing down at the paper, moving with a smooth cadence between the lines “It is not enough to read Hesse / and drink clam chowder / we must have the answers” (Sexton 2001, 30-32) and “upon finding a string / he would look for a harp.” (36-37). Though we can’t determine where meaning conspires, we saw similar meaningful connections across many “gifts”, in this moment and later



on with teachers in future classrooms and other courses we taught. . For example, I (Alecia) am reading *The Bloody Chamber*, the text Danny gifted Ga-hui, and preparing to teach it in my Children's Literature class. How might we begin to account for the threads of gifting? We can't trace where it began or where it might end. Gifting collides into the things we have come to love, the things we have come to see as tied to who we are and who we are becoming, and the things that others have come to love and give over to us. This intersection invites the potential for connection that is a part of the humanity we seek to engage in teaching.

### **Implications**

This inquiry into a figurative approach to assessment offers a novel and, we think, generative perspective on ways to prepare future educators. Figurative assessments engage both the assessor and assessee in a process of learning and meaning-making. Furthermore, we noticed how figurative forms of assessing offered opportunities for different kinds of knowledge to filter through the classroom space, encouraging imaginative new possibilities for how we have come to and continue to understand teaching practice through microteaching. For K-12 educators, these ways of assessing inch closer to the varied ways we understand students' learning in the wake of exciting work on new and multiliteracies (New London Group 2000).

We continue to grapple with (and embrace) the numerous directions these assessments take, and we hope to follow the learning that occurs. In doing so we take the lead from one student, Desmond, who reminded us that, inevitably and importantly, "we do investigate ourselves." Going forward, we persist in exploring how this mode of thinking towards the figurative and aesthetic may lead to more compelling instructional practices and reflective ways of engaging with pedagogy. One clear limitation to this study is that we didn't hear from the microteachers, those who received figurative feedback. Future work then could make sense of

how this feedback was received and taken up in eventual classroom practice. To that end, we wonder broadly how the poetic and literary might generatively overlap with the work of educating English teachers. We note for example how one particularly poetic moment in Holly's apophatic assessment, in which she asserted that "when we don't have anything to rely on we are responsible to create something [of] our own", re/sounds eerily, to our literarily-inclined ears, like the novelist Cormac McCarthy's words in *The Road*: "When you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (McCarthy 2006, 74). It's not so much that we're interested in making teacher-poets -- though perhaps we should be -- but rather that educating teachers with and through the poetic can help us move around some of the limitations of representation. We further ask English educators how experimenting with creative assessment practices -- especially at a time where standardization, with its urgent demand for solid results, weighs heavily on pre-service teachers and institutions -- may evoke possibilities towards better understanding what English teaching is, and what it may yet become.

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