

The Impact of Beginning Music Teacher Assessment on the Assessors: Notes from Experienced Teachers

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INTRODUCTION

The education profession has struggled with the difficult subject of beginning teacher evaluation for nearly forty years (Feiman-Nemser, 1996). Part of our difficulty in negotiating this terrain lies in the inherent unease that many of us feel at the prospect of evaluating our own colleagues. The traditional position held by many educators is that support and evaluation are incompatible, or mutually exclusive, functions. Teacher evaluation has historically been an administrative responsibility, while “. . . according to conventional wisdom, mentors should assist not assess on the grounds that novices are more likely to share problems and ask for help if mentors do not evaluate them” (Feiman-Nemser, 1996, p.1).

Meanwhile, some in the profession (i.e., Feiman-Nemser, Sweeney) are calling for a more comprehensive approach to induction that melds the ideas of training and assessment, partly in response to the increased numbers of new teachers entering the profession through alternate routes to certification. The traditional position has also been challenged by those who believe that the formative assessment of beginning teachers accomplishes both “bridging” and “gate-keeping” functions (Sweeney, 1998), thereby blurring the traditional boundaries between collegiate teacher preparation and in-service induction.

The separation, however, between assistance and assessment is still a source of major tension and debate within the profession. Linking assessment and assistance can prove stressful to many teacher mentors, even if they are *not* supportive of their mentee’s entry to the profession. Mentors need comprehensive support, counseling and training programs to negotiate this new terrain.

There has been a good deal of recent research concerning the structure and content of beginning teacher evaluation programs in the general education literature (Curtiss, 2000; Feiman-Nemser, Schwillie, Carver, & Yusko, 1999; Griffin, 1999). Much of this work has focused on program evaluation (Griffin, 1985; Kilgore & Kozisek,

1989; Perez, Swain, & Hartsough, 1997) and policy study (Kester & Marockie, 1987; Lawson, 1992; Morey & Murphy, 1990), providing a valuable theoretical and practical research base for our efforts in music education.

The research and policy literature on the topic in music education, though still small, is growing in size and scope (Conway, Krueger, Robinson, Haack & Smith, 2002; Conway, 2002a, 2002b, 2001; DeLorenzo, 1992; Haack & Smith, 2000; Krueger, 1999; Madsen & Hancock, 2002; MENC, 2000; Montague, 2000; Smith, 1994). Major findings point to the importance of the subject area match (music-music) to the successful induction of new music teachers (DeLorenzo, 1992; Krueger, 1999), to the importance of mentoring, generally (Conway, 2002a, 2002b, 2001; Montague, 2000; Smith, 1994), and to the need for increased communication and collaboration among all members of the school music community to help welcome new music teachers into the profession (Conway, Krueger, Robinson, Haack & Smith, 2002; Madsen & Hancock, 2002; MENC, 2000).

While the professional conversation surrounding beginning teacher issues has illuminated the particular problems experienced by the novice educator, somewhat lost in this discussion to date, however, is the impact that high-stakes beginning teacher evaluation initiatives has on those in the role of evaluator—namely, experienced music teachers. The purpose of this investigation, therefore, was to examine the changes in practice reported by experienced music teachers who served as assessors in the beginning music teacher evaluation program that formed the cornerstone of the state of Connecticut's Beginning Educator Support & Training (BEST) program. To gather data that would shed light on this issue, the following research questions were asked, based on those posed by Stevens in her 1995 study:

- How has your classroom performance changed as a result of the assessment experience?
- How have your attitudes toward teaching changed?
- How have you grown professionally?
- How have your relationships with your fellow teachers changed?

BACKGROUND

A few words of explanation regarding the BEST Program may be appropriate at this point. Drawing from initiatives at the national level, the Connecticut State Department of Education piloted a portfolio assessment of beginning teachers in 1996 to replace the system of classroom observations that had been in place. In 2000, the State required all second year teachers to complete this portfolio assessment, with the provision that those who fail be given a third year to complete the assessment and receive a provisional certificate. The Music Education content area went "on-line" in 2002, meaning that

teachers who do not successfully complete the portfolio assessment by the end of their third year of service are denied licensure.

In order to be eligible for the state's Provisional Educator Certificate, beginning teachers must demonstrate mastery of essential teaching competencies related to content knowledge, planning, instruction and assessment. These competencies are assessed through the portfolio assessment component of the Beginning Educator Support and Training Program, a comprehensive three-year teacher induction program. The data collected in the portfolio include videos of teaching and supporting documentation that addresses issues of instructional planning, teaching techniques and strategies, assessment practices, and reflective thought and writing on the part of the beginning teacher.

ACCESS/ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

In my position as one of the Music Scholars-in-Residence for Connecticut's BEST program, I was in an excellent position to observe first-hand how the BEST assessors dealt with the pressures and tensions created by finding themselves in their new roles as "teacher evaluators." I knew most of the assessors and had worked with several of them in various capacities, either as a supervisor for a student teacher in their school or district or through my work with the state music education association. This level of familiarity and mutual respect was crucial in establishing the rapport necessary for "unpacking" the experiences that the assessors were going through during their work as evaluators.

This shared work took place during a two-week time period over the summer at a local university. More than 20 music assessors and support personnel met daily for training sessions and portfolio reviews of second year teachers. Prior to participating in the summer scoring institute, each assessor was required to complete an extensive training program, which took place during the academic year. The training program covered all aspects of the assessment process, including philosophical foundations, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and scoring procedures.

SCHEDULE

The following schedule provides a timeline for when the various components that provided data sources for this research project occurred:

November 16 & 17, 2001	Standard Setting & Rubric Development
January 15, 2002	Benchmarking & Rubric Development
March 19 & 20	Scorer Training
May 21 & 22	Scorer Training
April 16	Standard Setting & Rubric Development
May 10	Scorer Training
June 7	Scorer Proficiency Training
July 22 – August 2	Summer Scoring Institute
August 16- Nov. 22	Email questionnaires/correspondence

DESIGN

In her review of research on beginning music teacher induction and mentoring, Conway states: "Because the problems faced by beginning music teachers are contextual, the initial research which explores these problems may be best studied through a qualitative lens. We, as a research community must replicate many studies in a variety of contexts in an effort to build a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of beginning music teacher induction" (Conway, 2001). In deciding to focus my investigation on the thoughts and perspectives of the experienced music teachers who served as BEST assessors, I decided to use a naturalistic paradigm to guide my research design choices.

Data Collection and Participants

The primary data collection technique was a semi-structured interview, conducted via an email questionnaire. This instrument was distributed after the close of the summer scoring institute so as to allow the assessors to focus on their evaluation duties without distraction. Other data sources were informal, impromptu focus-group meetings that often occurred during the two weeks of summer scoring. These discussions provided a valuable avenue into the thoughts and perceptions of the assessors, and helped to either clarify previous points or to extend my interpretations of comments made by various individuals at other times.

The people I worked with during the study (i.e., interview participants, focus group participants) were selected purposively, and consisted of individuals with a demonstrated interest in, and/or experience with, the BEST Program. Individuals were identified through recommendations from colleagues, recognition by peers, and evidence of previous participation in BEST or state department of education initiatives. Others also emerged and "identified themselves" during the course of the study as important participants in the research process.

I also met several times with selected BEST program administrators and project leaders to discuss their perceptions of the effect the assessment experience had had on the teachers involved, and followed up on these conversations with numerous email messages over the next few months. The conversations with these "insiders" were invaluable in providing the background and historical context that was sometimes necessary for me to understand the information I was receiving from the assessors.

Trustworthiness

Data triangulation and member checks were the principle methods used to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. Capturing the *voices of the assessors* was an important step in verifying the accuracy of the participants' responses. Several individuals conveyed their interest in receiving a copy of the results of the investigation, demonstrating their commitment to the BEST initiative and confirming my belief in the importance of this research agenda. Interview transcripts, my own analytical notes and initial attempts at

devising a coding structure were shared with peers at several points during the investigation. Preliminary interpretations were then shared with project “insiders” to provide “mid-course flight corrections,” and I also relied on my own experience as a music educator, as a music teacher educator and as a teacher evaluator to bring a sense of empathy to the interpretation of the data.

Analysis

Consistent with accepted methodology in qualitative inquiry, I employed the *constant comparative* method of data analysis. “The constant comparative method of data analysis is widely used in all kinds of qualitative studies. . . (and) involves comparing one segment of data to another to determine similarities and differences. . . Data are grouped together on a similar dimension. This dimension is tentatively given a name; it then becomes a category. The overall object of this analysis is to seek patterns in the data” (Merriam, 1998, p. 18).

Using the research questions as a template, I coded the participants’ responses to the emailed questionnaire for patterns, trends and themes. Codes that emerged included the desire or interest to be “seen as a role model”, the influence of the “Three Artistic Processes” on scorers’ teaching and assessment practices, the conflict between “standards-based teaching/best practices” and “traditional approaches” to teaching, the increase in confidence felt among portfolio scorers regarding their own professional knowledge, the increased ability to reflect on both their own practice and on the work of others, the recognition of changes portfolio scorers needed to make in their own teaching to align with the assessment standards in place for BEST, and a sense of pride in being involved in the BEST assessment process.

After comparing the codes to the relevant literature and the information gathered through the focus group discussions, I grouped the codes into patterns and looked for trends across responses. Four emergent themes became clear:

- *Professional Awareness/Recognition of “Best Practices”*
- *Confidence/Validation*
- *Reflection and Critical Analysis of One’s Own Practice*
- *Professional Development & Growth*

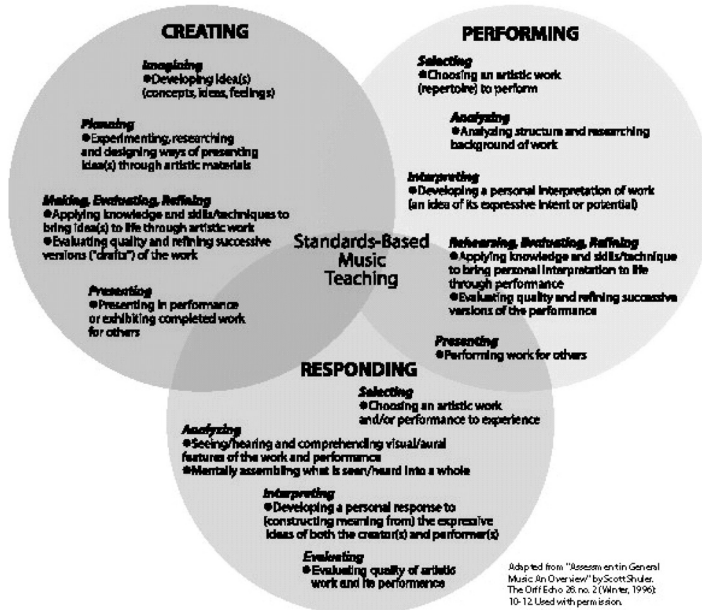
The following excerpts from the assessors’ responses are offered to provide a sense of the participants’ voices and of their perspectives on their experiences as evaluators of their newest colleagues. The excerpts are presented by theme in the section below.

DISCUSSION

Professional Awareness/Recognition of “Best Practices”

The gap between current standards-based teaching approaches and traditional methods of teaching has become much wider in the past decade or so, making it imperative that those who assess beginning music teachers are well-versed in what is being taught in teacher preparation training courses, and, conversely, that collegiate faculty make sincere efforts to embed their students in authentic settings during these courses, preferably in collaboration with practicing music educators. Those entrusted with the design of state-sponsored and national beginning teacher assessments should also consider whether these measures should be designed to drive the profession, or to merely reflect current practice.

The question of just what constitutes “best practice” in music teaching and learning is one that has occupied a central place in the professional literature for many years. In Connecticut, a consensus has been developed that good music teaching involves an integration of what are known as the Three Artistic Processes: Composing, Performing and Responding to Music (Shuler, 1996). This level of agreement regarding what good teaching looks like has clarified the task for the BEST assessors in their evaluation of the portfolios submitted by beginning teachers each summer (see Figure 1).



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Figure 1. The Three Artistic Processes: Creating, Performing and Responding.

Adapted from Shuler, S. C. (Winter 1996). Assessment in General Music: An Overview. The Orff Echo 28, (2), 10-12.

Perhaps as a result, the experienced teachers who function as assessors attribute a good deal of credit to the BEST training process for their ability both to recognize “good teaching” and to incorporate elements of standards-based instruction into their own practice. For example, this reply indicates a very thoughtful and specific response to using the assessment strategies in the BEST program: “I make a more deliberate attempt to include the 3 Artistic Processes in both lessons and rehearsals—and have expanded my assessment tools to include more student self-assessment.”

This comment from a veteran middle school band director reveals the changes one teacher has made to his practice: “5 years ago I would have said ‘What 3 Artistic Processes?’; now, my students create some, respond some--before, music education was mainly about ‘making music’ mainly through performance--I would not be teaching this way now but for my involvement with BEST.” Another instrumental music teacher said, “I have always thought out lessons and prepared opportunities to actively and consistently engage students in music learning, however, now my impetus for engagement involves aspects of music learning I had not previously considered. Most notably, I have attempted to include more responding activities in my instrumental lessons. For example, I have learned that responding to music is more complex than just passive listening to a musical performance. I involve my students in active and guided listening activities with written criteria and verbal discussion.”

A long-time music administrator commented, “I have begun to incorporate more aspects of our definition of good teaching into my own practice--have also been able to articulate qualities of good practice to the teachers that I supervise.” And this response from a veteran string music teacher summarizes the thoughts of several respondents: “I am more aware of what ‘good teaching’ looks like.”

Confidence/Validation

Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of my involvement with the BEST Program was seeing the enormous growth in confidence among nearly all of the experienced teachers who served as assessors over the entire training and assessment process. These individuals formed an impressive group; they were all accomplished teachers, administrators and/or performers, were highly respected by their peers and had earned leadership roles in their local and state professional associations.

Each portfolio scorer was selected through a rigorous application process, and was nominated by his/her school district. The assessors were required to complete at least 50 hours of comprehensive, discipline-specific training in the scoring of portfolios and meet a predetermined proficiency standard prior to scoring portfolios. The commitment for portfolio scorers includes “completing all components of the initial scorer training and the proficiency process, scoring for three years as a portfolio scorer (need not be consecutive years), and participating in refresher training and proficiency testing after year one” (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2003, pp. 2-3).

Although portfolio scorers are compensated \$100 per completed portfolio, and receive a \$300 stipend for completing both required training and proficiency scoring activities (CSDE, p. 3), these people are clearly “not in it for the money”. As explained below, involvement in the BEST Program is having profound effects on the veteran teachers who serve as portfolio scorers, especially in terms of building confidence and validating their decisions to participate in the assessment process.

One long-time BEST leader said, “I am 10 times more confident in myself as a teacher. . .as a direct result of my involvement with the BEST program.” Often, participation as a BEST portfolio scorer created new professional leadership opportunities for assessors: “Somehow word spreads quickly about involvement with BEST; for 2 years in a row I have been asked to consult and proofread portfolios for elementary classroom teachers--although the task is different, I feel confident in my ability to offer advice.”

Other teachers found that being involved as a portfolio scorer reinforced their belief in the importance of being a music teacher. For example: “My attitude hasn’t changed at all--it has been validated by the BEST process.” Said another veteran choral teacher, “My personal attitude towards teaching has not changed but it has definitely been reinforced while working with the BEST program.” And this teacher offers a broader perspective on this theme: “If anything, BEST has strengthened my conviction that what I do in my classroom is incredibly important in my community.”

Reflection and Critical Analysis of One’s Own Practice

Just as one of the goals of the BEST Program is to motivate beginning teachers to become more reflective practitioners, it appears that the portfolio scoring process has had a similar effect on the experienced teachers who serve as assessors. The theme of reflection and critical analysis came through clearly in the participants’ responses, as is evidenced through the excerpts below.

An instrumental teacher observed that. . .“(p)rofessionally, I have become more reflective in my teaching. I continually examine and analyze my own instructional methods, as well as have a desire to observe and learn from others.” Another teacher framed her thinking in terms of her role as a model for novice teachers: “I reflect more on how and why I choose materials and strategies--I frequently think ‘what would a camcorder capture if it was present? Would I be proud to have neophytes see it?’” The notion of one’s responsibility as a model for new teachers was also echoed in this response, from an instrumental music teacher: “As an assessor, I feel it is my duty to be a role model for how to implement the teaching and learning standards as put forth in the BEST handbook.”

For some teachers, their critique was centered on very specific elements of teaching: “I have become more analytical of the teaching process, student performance and assessment.” Another portfolio scorer felt that the assessment process may have helped him to avoid *burn out*: “Rather than falling into a rut, I constantly ponder what I am

doing and why--not looking for new things, but better ways and tools to be successful in helping kids acquire the skills we deem important. I have 'raised the bar' in my own expectations and perceptions of what make an excellent teacher."

Professional Development & Growth

As Elliott Eisner says, teachers need "space": Space to think, to reflect, to dream, and ultimately, space to grow. For many, if not most, teachers, moving "up" means moving "out"—into administration, into higher education, or out of education entirely. In order for our best teachers to have opportunities to advance without leaving the profession, there is a need for the creation of new roles and responsibilities for teachers.

During a previous educational reform movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, several large urban school districts (i.e., Toledo, Rochester, Cincinnati, Columbus) designed programs for beginning teachers around a peer assistance and review model that involved "consultant teachers" who provided assistance and made recommendations regarding continued employment. These initiatives were tied to "career ladder" programs for teachers, and were intended to provide leadership opportunities for practicing teachers while allowing those teachers to remain in the classroom.

Although largely successful in retaining experienced teachers through a combination of salary enhancement and career advancement, these local programs suffered severe setbacks during cyclical economic downturns. States and the federal government have been slow to pick up the slack, leaving us back at square one as a profession in creating professional "space" for teachers.

In Connecticut, the BEST Program addresses this need by providing opportunities for experienced teachers to work with novices as mentors, seminar leaders and portfolio scorers. For those who wish to seek new challenges but who choose to stay in the classroom, the BEST Program offers an important avenue for professional growth and self knowledge, as can be seen from the following comments.

One general music teacher identified involvement in BEST as the most significant vehicle for his professional development: "My role as a table leader has had the biggest impact on my professional growth--up until now, I felt that my poor teaching situation would make for a bad environment for a student teacher--I realize now, however, that in spite of a crazy schedule, I have much I could and should be sharing with new music teachers." Another portfolio scorer, who had responsibilities as both a teacher and as an administrator, said, "Working with other teachers that find great joy and personal satisfaction in teaching is a real 'shot in the arm'--although I find the scoring process 'draining', it is also invigorating, and it makes me look forward to beginning the school year after reviewing what should be standard teaching practices."

An instrumental music specialist drew a link between involvement in BEST and attaining his personal goals as a teacher: "It is important to me to be an effective educator and to continue growing as a teacher, refining instruction so that I may reach my goals

for developing independent musicians in my ensembles.” A middle school chorus teacher found a measure of personal fulfillment in the process, saying that. . .“(B)y participating in the BEST portfolio development and assessment process, I feel a sense of pride and a willingness to improve my own teaching.”

Finally, an instrumental music teacher expressed his appreciation for the sense of community developed through the BEST process with this response: “I am glad to have met the teachers involved with the BEST assessment process and have benefited both professionally and socially as a result of the many discussions.”

IMPLICATIONS

It is clear from these comments, and many others like them, that these teachers have been strongly affected by their involvement in the BEST Program. While we often look at the impact that these sorts of initiatives have on beginning teachers, it may be that the strongest reasons for examining such programs will be to determine their influence on veteran teachers. It is often said that one of the prime reasons that teachers identify for leaving the profession is a “lack of space to grow.” Perhaps the opportunity to become involved with beginning teacher mentoring, induction and assessment initiatives can be the means through which our more experienced colleagues can find the room to grow without leaving the classroom entirely.

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