

As you work to remake TPA, please keep in mind:

The TPA as set out clearly has been built for two functions.

The first is to restrict access to California Teaching Credentials for teacher candidates unable to pass the test. The assumption being that the test is a reasonable measure of necessary teaching quality for beginning teachers.

The second has been to focus teacher preparation programs into delivering a curriculum defined by a number of current pedagogical trends as well as the TPEs.

These two functions push on teacher preparation in not good ways. They also push against each other.

TPA as Gatekeeper

The TPA is not a good tool for gatekeeping. It seems plain that the TPA was made to serve as a tool to make poor quality teacher preparation programs more accountable for outcomes. Unfortunately this burden falls on students who were accepted into their programs and should not have been accepted in the first place. Too many teacher preparation programs in the state are eager and willing to accept students and their money with the promise that they will get a credential and a job without due care for these students or the profession. The TPA should not serve to fix this. These programs collect candidates' money whether they pass or do not.

Unfortunately the TPA serves as the gatekeeper of last resort and drags all candidates of all quality into a yes no measure of their ability to earn a license. All candidates have to move through the TPA with constant concern that they will fail if they are not careful to do all the many pieces in the exacting way required. You have heard plainly from candidates and institutions about the emotional wear and tear on students as they work to complete the TPA. Their energy and focus would be better spent on their teaching and students rather than the overly burdensome requirements to complete the TPA.

Should you believe the function of the TPA should still be primarily as gatekeeper, do consider allowances for good programs to opt out and to supply alternate satisfactory measures of teacher quality for teacher licensure.

TPA as a curriculum

The TPA as curriculum can be understood as a Trojan horse. While set out as a licensing assessment, the requirements for the assessment have forced teacher preparation programs to teach to the test. The Commission may believe that programs across the state need to be moved to be more inline with teaching to the expectations set out in the TPE. This again penalizes programs with solid traditions of preparing excellent teachers for our schools. TPA as curriculum is a form of teaching to the middle, forcing all programs to a kind of uniformity that dulls strong programs and pushes innovation and responsive teacher preparation to the side.

The TPA as Gatekeeper confounds any curricular or educational purpose. Instructors and teacher candidates cannot embrace a high-stakes test as a formative instrument to better teacher education. Learning comes about through interactive application of knowledge and skill over time. Mistake making and reflection are necessary for meaningful learning. A high stakes test cannot do either well.

The TPA as a curriculum confuses any gatekeeper function. The promise of any meaningful learning is lost in the doing of the assessment in order to pass the assessment. If the TPA were designed with Assessment for Learning in mind, the assessment would give greater and clearer attention to formative feedback. The assessment would be revisited by instructors and teacher candidates to set out direction for further learning. The finality of the TPA as a measure of teacher competence does not set up the TPA as a worthwhile curriculum for teacher candidate learning.

If the Commission believes that the TPA should serve either of these functions then the TPA needs to radically rethought.

The TPA as a performance assessment can serve as gatekeeper. To do so, there should be much less of it. A simple collection of teacher artifacts, videos and reflections with clear guidelines for what constitutes passing quality would serve. A lesser version would allow programs to integrate the assessment appropriately, not allowing the assessment to take up outsized space in teacher candidates' preparation. If the Commissions fundamental concern is keeping incompetent teachers from being licenced then it should put much, much more effort in raising the esteem of the profession to attract more capable teacher candidates.

The TPA as a curriculum would need to be built with the most capable teacher educators in the state. As a co-constructed curriculum the buy-in from teacher educators and candidates would be stronger, the assessment would be understood as a tool for bettering teaching, not simply as an onerous requirement forced on programs and candidates by the state. As a curriculum, it would need to be built with development in mind, iterative and formative over time, not simply a one time, single measure of competence. If the Commission intends to manage or define what happens in teacher education programs across the state, then the Commission needs to be more honest in this aim and should work from curricular practices that promote learning, not force a high-stakes test to do curricular work.

I know you are just the beginning the work to remake the TPA. Please be cautious and do not simply fall into making the TPA do more than it should. Avoid making the TPA all things for all matters of teacher preparation. Find one good purpose, involve teacher educators and their programs, and build something worthwhile.

Do contact me with any questions of clarifying comment

Johnnie Wilson

Lecturer, Teacher Supervisor
University of California, Santa Cruz
jobwilso@ucsc.edu