

Foreword

Special Issue: The Texas 87th Legislative Session

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I am so very proud of our University of Texas College of Education doctoral and masters students for this important special issue of the *Texas Education Review* (TER) that just came out. Congrats, as well, to the TER editorial board members, Alex Armonda, Lebon James, and Will Davies for their hard work on this special issue (see TER editorial board) focused on important work done by the Texas Center for Education Policy that weighed in on high-stakes testing during the 2021 87th session of the Texas State Legislature (TSL).

I, too, have some bragging rights here because three of the four pieces highlighted below reflects work done in my doctoral-level Ethnography Course that I taught in Fall 2020 that resulted in policy briefs and portfolios, making them actionable during the regular session that commenced in January, 2021.

The assignment was on what we in the assessment world term, "authentic assessment." This means that instead of high-stakes, standardized tests, students take on real-world tasks that are of concern to them. Authentic assessment gets them to do research and apply what they have learned in real-world contexts where they can impact the direction that policy takes.

Once the legislative session began in January, 2021, these, as well as other students taking my Spring, 2021, Policy Analysis Class, had varied opportunities like working in legislative offices, conducting bill analyses, drafting legislation, or assisting in the work of the Texas Education Legislative Equity Coalition. Several also got the chance to testify in legislative hearings. All of this fills my heart.

Back to the Fall class. When I first asked them what problem we should take on as a class project, I suggested school re-opening policy as this was and continues to be a hot issue in the context of the coronavirus pandemic.

Several students who were working in the schools at the time expressed their preference instead for us to focus on high-stakes testing, particularly for bilingual learners.

Given the Texas Education Agency Commissioner Mike Morath decision to go through with Spring testing despite the pandemic, the political-economy of this neoliberal agenda was also centered as a concern. Who profits from this testing system and to what end or ends?

"Okay," I said. "Let's do that," forcing me to change gears in the moment. In retrospect, I celebrate such beautiful alignment in focusing conceptually on high-stakes testing and its alternative, authentic assessment, in a class where this humanistic, social justice, intellectual approach could simultaneously get demonstrated, experienced in the flesh.

It was great observing all the students' work, from this semester and last, contributing in their own ways while generating the materials they needed for their policy briefs and portfolios on a range of policy topics in education.

What you see below are only the published policy briefs generated from the Fall ethnography class. The ethnographic component consisted of what students observed throughout the semester together with the data that they collected, combined with in-depth readings and discussions of books on ethnographic methods. Students' observations and ethnographic memos (or thematic summaries) from the many public meetings they attended found their way into their portfolios that they submitted at the end of the semester.

Paradoxically, because everything was remote due to the pandemic, our class concluded that we had significant access to policy discussions that in more normal times would have been more limited due to complicated schedules and travel costs associated with getting to and from places on time. Austin is not the easiest city to navigate and getting to San Antonio, Houston, or Dallas meetings can be a hike.

The students shared how working remotely expedited a sense of community and belonging that proved vital to their well-being, particularly for those living alone in their apartments throughout the pandemic. Zoom fatigue and the lack of human touch notwithstanding, there were clear benefits in this isolating context to working remotely.

The Fall class defended their policy briefs toward the end of the semester before a statewide committee of advocates representing different organizations, including Texas AFT, Texas LULAC, Every Texan, Texans Advocating for Meaningful Student Assessment (TAMSA), and member-affiliates of the Texas Education Legislative Equity Coalition.

I must confess that in the moment, it was a bit nerve-wracking as one cannot get more high-stakes than having to defend one's work before an expert audience. Of course, the students' performed excellently. From an authentic assessment perspective, they pretty much *had* to... I'm so proud of them. And that is the point about authentic assessment.

It's a process. It's formative. It's holistic. It's a relationship that a teacher has with their students. We seriously need to hit the pause button on mental testing and re-think the idea of what high-stakes assessment (not "testing") can and should be. I hope I've convinced you on just how awesome it could be if this is what school were about, period.

After all, it's what motivates our youth who, like ourselves, see a world spinning out of control. They become part of the solution in that very instance when they are called upon to put their own learning at the service of social justice. In fact, this motivates and inspires. Instead of racist, intimidating, high-stress, high-stakes standardized testing, let's give them meaningful, real-world tasks that they have to defend before a stakeholder audience.

There's a growing body of literature on this that you yourself can learn about and read, beginning with the New York Performance Standards Consortium Schools.

Did we in this class make a difference?

Absolutely. Bills were written, testimonies delivered, the work of a coalition was strengthened, a beautiful sense of community, both inside and outside of class, was established. Some students even secured meaningful jobs or internships in the process.

Further, as the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." It's an honor and a privilege to be part of that bending of the arc such that standing up to injustice—with the full weight of our intellect and integrity as members of a righteous community—is triumphal in itself.

Thanks to my teaching assistant Lauren Shook, for her much-needed and highly valued assistance throughout. Thanks to all our students for their hard work, guts, and intellect. Your love, caring, and compassion for Texas' children and youth was palpable and restorative.

Finally, many thanks to the advocacy community for embracing our students. Experiences like these leave indelible marks on their psyches and souls that last a lifetime. These are indeed the hallmarks of a just and virtuous education.

As William Butler Yeats once said, "Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire."

Do read and enjoy their well-conceived and well-written pieces.

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