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Moving Writing Out of the Margins in edTPA: “Academic Language” in Writing Teacher Education

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In a barrage of standards and standardized assessments, writing teacher educators are faced with a combination of related obstacles and potential opportunities (Zancanella and Alsup, 2010; Koziol, et al., 2006). Accountability measures directed toward teacher candidates, such as the edTPA (Teacher Performance Assessment), have caused great concern among those in writing teacher education, specifically. The edTPA, a teacher performance assessment of “subject specific pedagogy,” was developed by the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE) and now is being managed by Pearson. We share worry over the ways such performance assessments are implemented, and whether the types of writing performances valued in the assessments could “trickle” down and influence what teacher candidates eventually teach their own students. Yet, within the edTPA assessment are potential opportunities for writing teacher educators (WTEs) to help preservice teachers explore writing instruction through a discursive lens. These tensions present a challenge to WTEs and their students.

The implications of adopting the edTPA assessment are still far-reaching: the number of state participants continues to grow and nearly half of the participating states have linked this assessment to licensure. Over the last four years in the state of Illinois, where we work as WTEs at neighboring universities, we have watched our state become a major proponent of and leader in the implementation of edTPA. In accordance with Illinois law, as of fall 2015, the licensure of all teacher candidates will be determined not by internal measures like evaluations from clinical experiences or methods courses, but by candidates’ scores on an online portfolio assessment to be assembled and submitted during the

student teaching internship. Some states and universities have linked a passing score on edTPA to university program completion, positioning the test as the determiner of candidate readiness and—alarmingly—eligibility for graduation.

The increasing national use of the edTPA as a measure of teacher candidates' effectiveness, in some states the *sole* arbiter, requires us to critique the design, implementation, and evaluation of this high-stakes testing instrument. While there are several aspects of this assessment worth interrogating (e.g., the edTPA's corporate ties, its high monetary cost for teacher candidates, the reliance on external graders), our goal is to articulate possible effects of this assessment on writing teacher education and the teaching of writing in secondary classrooms. More specifically, we argue that programmatic or individual interpretation of the edTPA can marginalize writing instruction (and writing teacher education) by focusing on what the edTPA labels as the “subject specific pedagogy” assessment for English language arts, which focuses on “complex texts” (i.e., likely interpreted as literature). Further, we want to suggest specific ways that WTEs may respond to the edTPA assessment to highlight the discursive elements of effective writing instruction, such as attention to language and discourse in teaching interactions with a range of students. We hope to use our experiences preparing for the edTPA to help other WTEs consider how to respond in their states, classes, and with teacher candidates in ways that promote successful writing instruction.

Overview of edTPA

Before we conjecture about the potential impact of edTPA on writing teacher education we will briefly introduce the assessment. (Note that we are limited in what we can say due to rules based on which edTPA materials can be quoted.) We believe the edTPA, modeled on a successful teacher candidate assessment program used throughout California over the last decade (PACT), was initiated with good intentions. For example, as described on the website's “Welcome” page, edTPA was born of a desire to “create a nationally available assessment for new entrants to teaching—designed by teachers and teacher educators to reflect the real work of teaching, to support the learning of candidates, and to give useful feedback to programs that prepare teachers.” The developers sought to build a “valid, reliable measure that would respect the complexity of teaching, [and] reflect the academic knowledge and intellectual abilities required to advance student learning [...]” (“Welcome,” 2014).

The result is an online portfolio-style assessment requiring candidates to demonstrate skill in: “planning around student learning standards, adapting plans for students based on their specific needs, implementing and assessing instruction, developing academic language, evaluating student learning, and reflecting on how to improve student outcomes by continuing to refine teaching plans and strategies” (“Welcome,” 2014). In short, the assessment focuses on the three pillars of planning, instruction, and assessment.

An assessment focused on a practice-based approach that requires a reflective stance seemed promising, as it mirrored the assessments in place in our programs. Further, we were encouraged by the portfolio format, which again mirrors what we encourage in our methods courses as a reliable assessment of student progress in writing. Specifically, the teacher candidates’ portfolios include “Evidence of a candidate’s ability to teach [...] drawn from a subject-specific learning segment of 3-5 lessons from a unit of instruction taught to one class of students. Materials assessed as part of the edTPA process include video clips of instruction, lesson plans, student work samples, analysis of student learning, and reflective commentaries” (“edTPA FAQ,” 2014). While teacher preparation programs are encouraged to provide limited formative feedback and “support” for candidates, ultimately, Pearson recruits and trains “qualified” individuals (i.e., teacher educators, National Board Certified Teachers) with SCALE-developed material to assess and assign a score to each portfolio (“edTPA FAQ,” 2014). These candidates who earn passing scores will likely be certified. For those who fail, many universities are developing their own remediation guidelines. SCALE requires candidates to redo a section or the whole of the edTPA and then re-submit the assessment portfolio in order to try to achieve passing scores. As the assessment’s purpose “is intended to be used for teacher licensure and to support state and national program accreditation” (“State Policy,” 2014), the edTPA is likely to have implications for programs and individual teacher candidates.

More specifically, because of the focus of the assessment on teaching texts (likely interpreted as literary texts due to the examples provided in edTPA handbooks and by some universities), the impulse of some departments might be to significantly modify current methods course curriculum or shift sequencing of methods courses to prioritize literature over writing. In these rearranged spaces, writing may be conceptualized as only a tool for demonstrating learning, and not a rich location for self-exploration or learning about rhetorical appeal or audience awareness (Fecho, 2011; Gere, 1994; Yagelski, 2011). In teacher preparation

programs, learning to write may be permanently switched to writing to learn. This concerns us in many ways, the most pressing of which is the potential deformation of how writing and writing instruction are understood, employed, and valued by future teachers of English as a result of a singular but powerful assessment.

Writing's Marginalized History

The example given above—of programs resequencing classes to prioritize reading and literature-based coursework to the detriment of writing teacher education—may be extreme, but it draws attention to the core of our argument, that edTPA may marginalize writing teacher education. As our colleagues in higher education are well-aware, composition (as a field of study) has struggled to gain equal footing with literature in university English departments (Hairston, 1982; Russell, 2002). Many have examined the irony that the production of written text was the foundation of Western education, and that courses in writing often outnumbered those in literature in post-secondary institutions, yet composition remained marginalized until the second half of the twentieth century (Berlin, 1984; Berlin, 1987; North, 1987).

This pattern of marginalization was reflected, to an extent, in some English education programs where the teaching of writing was often an afterthought in teacher preparation (Neill, 1982; Tremmel, 2002). Writing pedagogy, when included, was offered through a generalized, all-encompassing “English methods” course where it was typically second-tier to literature methods and framed as an assessment tool or skill set in service of a text. This remains true today in some licensure programs (Hochstetler, 2007; Tulley, 2013). However, in the decades after the rise of composition in the university, there was a push against the domination of literature and literary study in English teacher education. More specifically, the single English methods course model was sometimes replaced in licensure programs by two distinct courses, with the intention of equal attention to literature methods *as well as* writing pedagogy (Tremmel, 2002).

Despite these measures, evidence suggests that writing pedagogy remains marginalized in some ways in English education programs and in the scholarship of the field (Stock, 2012; Tremmel, 2002). Even attempts to integrate writing pedagogy can mean challenges due to candidates' lack of experience with supporting academic writing (Dipardo, Staley, Selland, Martin, & Gneiwek,

2012), and disciplinary literacy in ELA often prioritizes reading in the discipline (e.g., Rainey & Moje, 2012). Candidates' English studies coursework is still largely literature-based at the university level, leading our colleagues to advocate for more involvement by English studies faculty (Smith, Bowen, & Dohm, 2014). Others even claim the long-term success of the National Writing Project's summer institutes is a manifestation of the need for extended training and support for writing teachers.

The historical conflicts between writing and literature in university English departments and English education programs are also present in the secondary English classroom: Research has shown that while English teachers may teach literature collaboratively and creatively, they may associate grammar and writing with traditional approaches and as something they "hate" or dread teaching in comparison to literature (Brosnahan & Neulieb, 1995). Teacher comfort level with writing may impact this as well. Smagorinsky, Wilson, and Moore (2011) point to the problems faced by graduates of literature-oriented teacher education programs, as teachers encounter mandates to support student learning in other areas, like writing. Tate (1970) comments further on this phenomenon, which remains true today in many ways:

The education of the typical English teacher is predominantly a literary education, and few colleges require the future teacher to take a single composition or rhetoric course beyond the freshman level. Prospective teachers seldom complain during their college years about this situation because most of them have been drawn to English studies in the first place because of their interest in literature. Yet when they become teachers of English, they soon discover that they are judged, to a large extent, not by the literary sophistication their students achieve but by the writing ability their students acquire (p. v).

Here we see a result of the long-standing focus on literature at the university level, which is a greater emphasis on literature and literary analysis in coursework required for English majors (Connors, 1997). This power dynamic influences the preparation of English majors who become teachers, meaning that subject matter preparation for English teachers most often involves literary study, with limited emphasis on composition or language study. To compound this problem, the

edTPA is likely to be interpreted as solely a literature-based teaching exercise, to the potential exclusion of meaningful writing and language study.

edTPA as an Opportunity for WTE

Each content area's edTPA handbook highlights one or two teaching strategies or foci that are deemed essential by experts in that particular area. The content area experts consulted in creation of the ELA edTPA chose a textual focus. They might argue that this focus does not mean there aren't many other essential skills/strategies in ELA teaching; it just happens that text-based teaching was highlighted for this particular "subject specific" edTPA. As a result, it is unlikely that candidates will choose to focus an edTPA learning segment (3-5 consecutive lessons) on writing, as the pedagogical skill and focus in the English-language arts handbook is interpretation of texts. Already some "models" being developed by individual programs (and available online) offer examples of lessons based exclusively on canonical short stories and literary vocabulary. Additionally, what we are hearing from candidates and colleagues implies that baseline interpretations of handbook prompts support our predictions: most of the edTPA portfolios for teacher candidates in our English education programs will likely feature some sort of literature or other text as the centerpiece of the learning segment. Therefore, one of the consequences (unintended or not) of the edTPA planning documents for secondary ELA seems to be that writing is in service of complex text interpretation.

The potential for the edTPA to perpetuate the historically marginalized status of writing in the context of the middle or high school English classroom is a concern we share. Early analysis of the edTPA documents show the edTPA may further marginalize writing instruction in teacher education if English educators don't unpack assigned tasks for their intersections with effective writing instruction. With a closer look, we were heartened to see ways that the assessment provides opportunities to highlight the discursive nature of effective instruction for a range of students through attention to academic language. A proactive stance can spin this discursive thread as an opportunity provided for writing teacher education. This stance can help us understand the "language demands" aspect of academic language in the edTPA in ways that help prevent further marginalization of writing teacher education. In fact, this focus on language demands provides an opportunity to reframe the edTPA—even to resist how it is being taken up. We *can* privilege writing in the edTPA.

It is true that at face value the edTPA seems to limit writing to an assessment role, or as a “writing task” and “written product” in response to a text. We argue that writing pedagogy is in fact a crucial part of candidate learning necessary for the edTPA. For instance, successful candidates will need to note linguistic features of texts, identify written academic language needed to understand those texts, and pinpoint common student writing “errors” and misunderstandings in order to provide feedback. And candidates will need to understand and plan their instructional discourse purposely. These are all understandings that can be linked to writing teacher education for the purposes of helping candidates make well-informed and effective decisions about teaching writing while meeting the criteria of the edTPA.

Defining “Academic Language”

In this section, we consider the definition of *academic language* used by edTPA and describe what this emphasis means for teacher candidates. This term and its definition appears to be drawn from scholarship in educational linguistics that attempts to unpack language demands for students (especially language learners and other types of students). Unfortunately, in the edTPA these terms emerge in a complex mire of terminology, which we cannot cite here due to privacy agreements for password-protected edTPA materials. Unpacking this terminology—especially the focus on academic language—can provide writing teacher educators with opportunities to prioritize our disciplinary understandings related to language and writing. Their definition includes a long list of terminology, such as language demands, discourse, vocabulary, syntax, language functions, and language supports. The lines between these terms are potentially slippery, so it is unsurprising that materials have revised the definitions of “discourse” over the last couple of years.

Our guess is that the materials have been revised due to the ways teachers have been struggling with understandings of “academic language.” Initial interpretations often prioritized the “vocabulary” aspect as it ties to teaching literature. On closer look, this limited focus was not enough to be proficient. Actually, what candidates need to be able to do with academic language, or specifically “language demands” of classroom tasks in ELA, dovetail with best practice often advocated for in writing methods courses. These methods include giving and receiving effective feedback; understanding and scaffolding genre-

based writing; teaching language and grammar; and calling attention to reading/writing connections.

We look more closely at the *language demands* sub-categories of “language functions, syntax, and discourse” to provide a rationale for why writing teacher education is actually crucial in candidates’ successful understandings of “academic language.” These understandings are important because teacher candidates will need help seeing how “academic language” can encompass knowledge of writing instruction (not just literary vocabulary and literary analysis typical in literature methods courses). In fact, the assessment criteria should push candidates to move beyond a sole focus on vocabulary. In addition to vocabulary, successful candidates are required to attend to syntax and/or discourse in their planning, instruction, and assessment materials. In the next sections, we further describe how this attention to varied aspects of discourse and language relates to writing teacher education.

Planning, Instruction, and Assessment: Writing in the edTPA

Planning in the edTPA: Why writing teacher education is crucial

There are multiple opportunities to shape how “academic language” is interpreted in a discipline-specific way, and not just based solely on literature methods. In planning, candidates are asked to reflect on what students already know, how students may struggle, and/or what may be new to students.

In planning, candidates must consider the challenges (i.e., syntactic, or otherwise) posed by the texts and writing prompts they include in the learning segment. Planning will require candidates to provide examples of their students’ prior learning and assets (i.e., cultural, personal, or community) in addition to connections to research and theory to support their instructional choices. Additionally, the edTPA rubrics assess the candidates’ abilities to design lessons with clear alignment among standards, objectives, learning tasks, and materials.

In response, we need to be explicit in our courses about the discipline-specific words and concepts associated with planning writing instruction and understanding written texts. For instance, candidates will need to describe in their planning materials which *language function* is the focus of the lesson segment. Language functions include, but are not limited to, the following modes: to analyze, to argue, to synthesize, to explain, to interpret, or to describe.

In the planning process, candidates also must attend to vocabulary, syntax, and discourse as a means for identifying language demands for their students.

Given the literary foci of the assessment, it may be likely that candidates will employ literary vocabulary. However, the edTPA materials themselves do not provide this restriction explicitly for vocabulary, and some vocabulary might include terms related to text structure that come from writing instruction (i.e., warrant, stance, or other terms). Since edTPA uses the term “discourse” to mean organizational structure or text structure, our teacher candidates’ knowledge of how language function interrelates with the genre, audience, and purpose of texts will be crucial as well.

In terms of the syntactic element of language demands, WTEs can support candidates to use their knowledge of writing and knowledge of reading as writers. This knowledge will be crucial for lesson planning—both of instructional discourse and assessment. If we think of “syntax” as part of our disciplinary discourse in writing teacher education, we can further make these connections explicit. For instance, teacher candidates in writing methods courses may learn about writing in unfamiliar genres and how to teach genre analysis, including understanding of varied syntax in different genres (e.g., Fleischer and Andrew-Vaughn’s *Writing Outside Your Comfort Zone*).

Good planning means knowing about one’s students, as we know, and is required in edTPA planning tasks; writing as reflection is one way to generate this knowledge. Teacher candidates will need to articulate their students’ personal, cultural, and community assets; we argue that writing and writing instruction can lead to these understandings. Consequently, approaches to formative assessment in writing teacher education may be as crucial to candidate success on edTPA as the ability to design prompts for written products. This means sharing writing methods—like reflective writing done by students and/or teachers—that help new teachers learn about their students since our candidates will need to be able to understand the range of students in their classrooms in order to justify their lesson decisions (e.g., see “Questions for Planning Template” in Wessling, Lillge, & VanKooten, 2011).

As candidates design prompts, attention to process approaches and other language supports could help them justify the purposes behind instructional moves. For example, they will need to plan both informal and formal assessments of learning in the learning segment. Descriptions of student language they plan to hear (oral) and see (written) is important to this planning; their understandings of the complex ways that written and oral language intersect will be vital.

The lesson plans need to demonstrate how candidates are supporting their lessons based on theoretical and research-based principles. As our candidates justify their instruction, describe use of language supports (i.e., guided practice, modeling, think-pair-share), and identify common misconceptions for the focus of the learning segment, we can support them by offering examples of principles from writing instruction. The NCTE principles for writing instruction and other research policy briefs are a starting point, though we need to make the research base for these principles more explicit (“NCTE Beliefs,” 2004).

Instruction components in the edTPA: Why writing teacher education is crucial

Another opportunity for supporting our teacher candidates in these key understandings from writing teacher education is to discuss instructional discourse as part of lesson design and planning. For instance, we can help them analyze practicing teachers’ use of language in writing instruction. We can help them consider how their language use as teachers positions different kinds of students in ELA classrooms. By calling attention to interactional awareness, we can help them understand that they shape discourse in every ELA lesson.

Candidates will have to provide evidence of student language use to show learning as well as their abilities to establish a positive environment in the classroom. To document their rapport with students and responsiveness to student needs, candidates will benefit from our modeling of and analysis of interactional discourse in equitable writing instruction. For example, this could entail analyzing writing mini-lessons with discussion of teacher discourse (e.g., McBee Orzulak, Lillge, Engel, & Haviland, 2014) and issues of accommodation for the moment of teaching and with varied students. Further, they can incorporate writing strategies (collaborative and individual) that build rapport in the classroom.

The instruction component asks candidates to consider their use of “subject-specific pedagogy.” Links to prior learning, for example, could require instructional references to past writing activities, assignments, or terminology. For instance, the writing process and rhetorical awareness could emerge as candidates describe their choice of language function and how they will support the writing task and/or next steps after the learning segment. Our discussions of what it means to teach (vs. assign) writing based on ongoing in-class assessment of students’ needs could be crucial. In addition to areas promoted by the CCSS (extended and short time frames for writing; planning, revising, editing, and

publishing; writing as recursive process; individual versus collaborative writing; ethical use of sources), candidates may consider research-based arguments for using student-based topic choice, modeling techniques, and functional grammar.

On a metacognitive level, the edTPA asks candidates for reflective writing in this section that is supported by evidence. To begin this task, candidates can draw on concepts from composition-based coursework as well as writing methods to carefully craft responses for this specific genre of writing. Candidates can employ strategies learned in these contexts to aid in prewriting, for example, as they consider what specific data points should be summarized, synthesized, and analyzed, to best showcase their thinking about responding to this evidence-based assessment.

Assessment in the edTPA: Why writing teacher education is crucial

After teaching the learning segment, candidates must provide evidence from students of meeting the language function. In this way, writing skills are included as language functions, such as students writing texts that are narrative based, informative, or creative. We can link these functions to our discussions of teaching versus assigning writing and the demands of different genres.

In the analysis component of the edTPA, candidates are asked to examine student learning related to language demands, including their patterns of “error.” In the analyses of student work, however, the terminology of student “error” used by edTPA may need unpacking in relation to the teaching of writing. How do we conceive of “error” differently than in other fields? How do we prevent perpetuation of ineffective correction feedback that has plagued traditional prescriptivist grammar instruction? As an example of resisting the “error” hunt in the writing classroom, we can draw candidate attention to research on best practices in grammar instruction, which resists teaching grammar for grammar’s sake, and endorses using authentic student writing to guide teachers in which grammatical concepts to review or introduce.

Our WTE courses can support candidates’ abilities to identify the evidence from their lessons. We already know that candidates need hands-on practice analyzing and responding to student writing (Sherry & Roggenbuck, 2014). However, an emphasis on pattern-based analysis may be needed to help candidates move beyond a simplistic “error” hunting approach in their responses to writing. In particular, candidates may need practice looking for class patterns—of both students’ needs and strengths—and identifying specific areas for focal

students. The focus on focal students in their analyses means candidates need to engage with writing theory and practice for working with ELL writers, students with IEPs, and gifted students in the writing classroom, as these are understandings that will support their analysis of varied student work.

Another area to make explicit is the ways that writing teacher education teaches about how to provide responses to students and give effective feedback in writing instruction. The edTPA guide gives examples of explicit feedback that may link to these discussions in writing teacher education, and some examples in the guide are actually writing focused.

Feedback for students can include written, audio, or video responses. We might seek ways to integrate more nontraditional methods for responding to student writing within our courses to model for candidates the various ways to approach this common teacher task. Our teaching of conferencing, for instance, could provide an example of a specific feedback-based activity that might be video-recorded and presented as evidence of teacher response to student writing. Further, we could employ audio feedback (e.g., speaking into a recording device and distributing our responses via mp3 or other file) on assignments in our methods courses.

Candidates will also need to plan next steps in instruction, which certainly may describe long-term writing-based projects. They will need to support their analyses with principles from research and theory. The scaffolded lessons or unit plans many of us include as capstone assessments in our writing methods courses may serve as a location to practice the skills described here.

Next Steps for Writing Teacher Educators

By framing these opportunities—the use of reflective writing in planning and assessment; interactional discursive lenses in instruction; attention to writing discourse in instruction, planning, and assessment; analysis of assessment tools; syntactic analysis in planning and assessment; process approaches to planning and instruction—we can avoid pigeonholing writing teacher education’s contribution to edTPA as a student “work sample” or “product” to demonstrate knowledge of literary vocabulary.

We can resist casting the “subject specific pedagogy” in ELA as solely literature based. In doing so, we need to shape definitions of academic language for the teaching of writing. Academic language in ELA is not just about

vocabulary and text complexity. Part of this means developing common language in writing teacher education and acknowledging what already exists.

Candidates as writers/teachers: Opportunities for assessing the assessment

Even as we seek to support candidates with producing a literature-based edTPA learning segment with robust engagement with writing and language pedagogy, the assessment itself provides an opportunity for continued discussion about writing. As a performance assessment, the edTPA provides a case study in our discussions of methods for evaluation. For example, the multiple rubrics used in the edTPA lend themselves for analysis, inviting a conversation about the pros and cons of rubric use (Popham, 1997; Wilson, 2007). Further, we can encourage a rhetorical analysis of the assessment and ponder *what is being valued and evaluated* by the edTPA portfolio, to borrow language from Nancie Atwell. Using the language surrounding and within the assessment provides rich data for our teacher candidates to mine when thinking about discourse in education, broadly, and the ways such discourse impacts writing and writing instruction.

Many writing methods courses ask candidates to think of themselves as writers and reflective practitioners—understandings that will be put into practice with the edTPA. Candidates have to use evidence in their writing as part of this process, a skill that they will likely need to be able to teach their own students. With the recent changes to the SAT writing assessment, for example, this aspect of writing is officially on trend. Again, this writing task brings up questions of audience, assessment, and validity that candidates will need to grapple with in response to the assessments their students will encounter.

A final suggestion, in concert with candidates as writers, is viewing the edTPA as an opportunity for writing as advocacy. Given the alignment of many writing methods courses with the general understanding of writing as a tool to effect change, we can encourage our candidates to respond to the edTPA by communicating their feedback to Pearson and SCALE and state boards of education, for example, and voice their experiences and insights to these powerful bodies for the purpose of helping shape the edTPA or push back against specific elements of the assessment that may or may not reflect their concepts of “best practices” in teaching the ELA.

Long-term implications

While the analysis of writing in the edTPA offered here provides much-needed discussion for ways to work within and push back against one standardized assessment for teacher candidates, there remains work to be done. In “Writing as Praxis,” Robert Yagelski (2012) challenged us to reshape education reform conversations to “emphasize the humanness of schooling and the capacity of writing to help us live our lives more fully and mindfully” (Yagelski, 2012, 202). This challenge calls us to go beyond defining and prioritizing academic language for our field, as important as those contributions may be. Current conversations about accountability in teacher education invite opportunities for critiquing how assessments like edTPA and its competition (e.g., ETS recently announced a national preservice assessment for teacher candidates) can limit the ways we think about writing. More specifically, as states adopt these assessments, we can encourage dialogue among colleagues, professional organizations, state and national educational leaders, and the testing companies themselves, for the purpose of questioning how such assessments affect the way we conceptualize, value, and employ writing in all classrooms.

These assessments are powerful moments in our candidates’ teaching internships. For many, the edTPA is the capstone teaching encounter that concludes their experiences in our programs. What are the short and long-term effects of the edTPA on our candidates and how they think about teaching writing? How does the edTPA shape our candidates’ narratives about our programs’ ideas about writing? In what ways does the edTPA impact the relationships among teachers, candidates, students, and writing? These are important questions to consider as more and more states approve standardized assessments for preservice teachers, and these assessments stand to impact the ways candidates take up writing and writing instruction.

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