

Appendix K:

The Rigor of Typical Assignments in Teacher Prep Coursework on Instruction

In November 2014, NCTQ published *Easy A's and What's Behind Them*, which uses evidence from more than 500 institutions of higher education to show that at a majority (58 percent) of these institutions, teacher candidates earn higher grades than undergraduates as a whole. NCTQ's analysis of approximately 7,500 assignments at nearly three dozen institutions suggests that high grades result from a prevalence of assignments in teacher preparation that were termed "criterion-deficient" or "unanchored" — because they are not designed to increase mastery of specific knowledge and skills and can generally only be evaluated for completeness. More discussion of the nature of unanchored and anchored assignments can be found at <http://www.nctq.org/dmsStage/EasyAs>.

Assignments in teacher prep coursework syllabi evaluated for this study were examined to determine whether they are anchored or unanchored; if the latter, the means to anchor them is explained.

Assignments in syllabi

All assignments in syllabi in the sample that were identified as including one or more of the fundamental instructional strategies were examined. Assignments were coded as anchored or unanchored. Assignments that were not described in sufficient detail to be coded were not included.

Figure K1 provides examples of anchored and unanchored assignments.

Figure K1.

Anchored Assignment

One mini-lesson must include:

- a. Introduction/effective motivation
- b. Organization/logical and sequential development of lesson
- c. Subject matter knowledge
- d. Effective use of questioning
- e. Effective use of materials and equipment
- f. Enthusiasm/self confidence

Topics for mini-Lessons – Choose one

- a. Subtraction algorithm of whole numbers
- b. Division algorithm of whole numbers.

The topic for this assignment is appropriately limited, allowing the instructor to give detailed feedback on how content is addressed. Requirements for the assignment are clear and are focused on demonstrating specific knowledge and skills.

Unanchored Assignment

Each candidate will teach a short lesson on the topic of the candidate's choice to the class. The lesson presentation must include all critical lesson components, follow a specific model of instruction, and actively engage students in the learning. The lesson presentation should be 20 minutes in length. All lessons will be videotaped.

The assignment has clear requirements on which it will be graded, but candidates can select any topic/grade level they wish, limiting the likelihood that instructor can provide detailed feedback on how content is addressed.

Only 47 of the assignments given in the 219 courses in the sample incorporated one or more of the fundamental instructional strategies (an average of fewer than one assignment per program). Of those 47 assignments, only 20 assignments (43 percent) were anchored. All but two of the anchored assignments were tests or quizzes, rather than lesson planning assignments in which understanding of the fundamental instructional strategies could most productively be discerned.

Given that lesson planning is an integral part of teacher preparation and lesson planning assignments are common, why are anchored lesson planning assignments not common? The answer lies in the expansiveness of lesson planning assignments: Instructors allow candidates to select the topics on which they will write lesson plans, rather than offering a limited number of topics. This makes it less likely that instructors can provide productive feedback on the work product.

For example, the strategy most often seen in lesson plans is the requirement to **posing probing questions**. Productive instructor feedback on the possible questions included in a lesson plan is much more likely if the questions pertain to the same (or only a few) possible lesson topics than if the questions are unique to each teacher candidate in a class.

Anchoring assignments

Often assignments can be easily anchored. Two typical assignments found in syllabi in our sample show that only simple changes are needed to increase their effectiveness for training purposes.

Figure K2. Typical Assignments

Unanchored assignment	Steps to improve	Why is the anchored version more effective?
<p>Lesson Plan</p> <p>After instruction, each candidate will prepare a lesson plan that incorporates all of the required elements included in the lesson plan template in this syllabus. Your lesson plan should also incorporate one of the instructional strategies we learned about this semester. This is an opportunity for social studies majors to show their primary source materials.</p>	<p>Rather than allowing the teacher candidate to choose any subject area and the instructional strategy, the instructor should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ specify the standards and content area that the lesson plan should address, and ■ specify the instructional strategy to be used. 	<p>Limiting the scope of the content lets the professor efficiently compare work across teacher candidates to determine who has a strong grasp of the material and who may need additional training in teaching the standards and using key instructional strategies.</p>
<p>Instruction paper</p> <p>Participants will complete and submit a 5- to 10-page paper that explains how you plan to use what you have learned this semester in your future classroom. We will discuss this paper in class and you will be provided with opportunities to discuss this piece with others.</p>	<p>This open-ended assignment may cause some teacher candidates to propose and reinforce incorrect approaches to instruction.</p> <p>Instead, ask teacher candidates to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ summarize the six fundamental instructional strategies, and ■ offer examples of how they might implement a strategy related to each of the “big five” in a first-grade classroom when teaching a specific topic. 	<p>Asking teacher candidates to summarize research-backed techniques can help them internalize what they’ve learned. Asking that they apply these techniques in a specific context ensures that the candidates are capable of using their knowledge in practice. Limiting the scope of the content by specifying the instructional strategies and the topic to be taught lets the professor efficiently compare the work across teacher candidates to determine who has a strong grasp of the material and who may need additional training.</p>