The Case of Assessment Center:

How the purpose, logic and experience
of an embedded performance assessment of school leaders is built
around an epistemology of practice

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Introduction

There is increasing agreement in the field of leadership preparation that robust performance assessments are needed to capture and evaluate the complexity of school administrators' work. First, there was the development and adoption of tools designed to measure the effectiveness of practicing school leaders such as the Vanderbilt Assessment for Leadership in Education and Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning. Many of these tools rely on extensive survey data from multiple stakeholder groups. Now, several states, such as Massachusetts, Florida and California, have adopted or begun the process of adopting performance assessments to measure the competence of aspiring school leaders. They seek to assess the candidates' preparedness for such domains as vision for student achievement, instructional leadership, observation and mentoring of teachers, and engaging parents and other stakeholders through performance assessment rather than feedback data. In addition, these assessments serve to define the minimum threshold of readiness rather than exemplary practice.

In the last decade, several studies and policy briefs have sought to describe the qualities of effective school leaders and preparation programs that produce such leaders. One example is the 2007 report for the Wallace Foundation, "Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Leadership Development Programs," in which Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr and Cohen identified key characteristics of leadership programs, which include, among other traits, curricular alignment. This report describes assessments as being tied to the development of key leadership behaviors. While papers such as this were a welcome and needed development in guiding the content and structure of leadership preparation programs, identifying the features of excellent programs has occurred amidst strong and highly politicized

calls for accountability from teachers, administrators, schools and professional preparation. For

example, the US Department of Education's Non Regulatory Guidance for Building Systems of

Support for Teaching and Leading within Title II Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act

(ESSA) of 2015 suggests the requirement "that the academy will award a certificate of

completion to a candidate only after the principal or other school leader demonstrates a record of

success in improving student performance (7)."[1] Thus, while the research literature has helped

improve leadership preparation programs, a separate but connected conversation in the field of

educator preparation policy has emerged about the need to assess novice administrators through

performance assessments. This mounting interest in the implementation of Administrator

Performance Assessments (APA) also sits in a larger context of educator performance

assessment nationally, particularly the relatively rapid adoption of the edTPA, by multiple states

to assess the readiness of novice teachers to enter the classroom (Au, 2013; Sato, 2014; Price,

2016).

Heretofore, the conversation about APAs has mainly centered on the development of large state-

wide assessments such as the MA-PAL in Massachusetts, which is now a credentialing

requirement for aspiring principals in that state. Currently, in California, the creation and

adoption of a similar state-wide standardized measure of readiness for aspiring administrators is

already in progress. This assessment, CAL Administrator Performance Assessment (Cal APA),

will be tied to the California Administrator Performance Expectations that are based on the

California version of the revised ISLLC standards. The recently adopted policy of the California

Commission on Teacher Credentialing also allows for the development of local administrator

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[1] The complete copy of non-regulatory guidance is available at
http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essatitleiipartaguidance.pdf.

performance assessments which meet the adopted design standards. However, while the creation

of local assessments that meet the design standards has not been funded by the state (as the

development of a state-wide APA has been), locally-designed performance assessments have

been used by some principal preparation programs throughout the state for many years and

present an opportunity to learn about the nature of local program-embedded performance

assessments and their affordances for candidate and program learning.

For this paper we studied one such assessment, developed by the Principal Leadership Institute at

UC Berkeley, called Assessment Center. We see it as a valuable case because it illuminates how

an assessment constructed from an *epistemology of practice*, rather than an *epistemology of*

possession (Cook and Brown, 1999), can work in the service of candidate and program learning,

as well as for the development of the profession. We make this distinction based on the

organizational theory of Cook and Brown, who argued that the learning of individuals within

organizations and the learning of organizations themselves should be conceptualized as a

"generative dance" between tacit, explicit, group and individual knowledge. We identify that

PLI has an assessment developed from an epistemology of practice for three reasons: 1) its focus

on approximations to practice simulations, which require candidates to engage in enactment of

leadership, drawing on tacit and explicit knowledge, 2) the emphasis that the Assessment Center

places on group knowledge and assessment, which reflects a recognition of professional

knowledge as embedded in the organizational relationships of the school and educational

context; and 3) because of the orientation to ongoing program and professional learning that the

assessment embodies. Unlike many performance assessments, PLI Assessment Center does not

rely on artifacts of practice, but, rather, creates opportunities for candidates to simulate deliberate aspects of practice to demonstrate individual and group knowledge.

Assessment Center consists of two major performance events, during which candidates participate in simulated scenarios that approximate the real work of school leaders. The first Assessment Center occurs at the half way point of the program and requires candidates to work individually and in teams on scenarios related to instructional leadership and interpreting data for the purpose of school improvement. The second Assessment Center occurs at the three quarter point of the program and centers on a mock expulsion hearing as well as analyzing school wide strengths and needs from the perspective of a new principal, in which candidates must demonstrate multiple competencies related to legal and policy content as well as systemic analysis**.** Both events also require them to showcase individual and group-related skills and knowledge. We argue that though other performance assessments place a clear value on practice, they are generally built from an epistemology of possession, partly because they rely on materials, videos and artifacts filtered by the candidate, which he or she curates to meet the given standards. This approach privileges individual knowledge and explicit knowledge, such as written reflections on practice, rather than the enactment itself. The PLI Assessment Center's relatively unique approach in the field of leadership assessment (though both medicine and policing use similar assessment techniques)[2] grows out of an epistemology of practice, which

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[2] For a more detailed description of the training of physicians, see Cooke, Irby & O'Brien (2010). *Educating Physicians: a call for reform of medical school and residency* (Vol. 16). John Wiley & Sons. For a more detailed description of police training scenarios, see Chares, J. (2013). *Care and Enforcement: a study of police training for teacher education researchers.* (Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley).

may add to the conversation about the affordances of program-embedded performance

assessments.

Our paper reports on the preliminary findings of our year-long study of the PLI Assessment

Center system. While we are still in the process of coding and analyzing our data, several themes

have begun to emerge. First, Assessment Center appears to create opportunities for candidates to

demonstrate tacit knowledge of leadership, which is difficult to surface in traditional written

exams and papers, and perhaps, even through written reflection on aspects of one's own practice.

Second, Assessment Center accounts for group knowledge as an essential element of leadership,

by creating both group activities and group assessments. Third, Assessment Center creates

opportunities for program learning and refinement, because instructors, coaches and the director

of the program are closely involved in the creation of the scenarios, and are expected to make

adjustments to the individualized education of candidates, as well as the program overall, as a

result of participating and collecting data from the assessment.

Conceptual Frame and Method

In the conversation surrounding the move toward implementing performance assessments for

novice administrators, the word "authentic" has been used to describe the type of practice the

assessment will capture, and can, therefore, be assessed. For example, the California APA

Design Standards[3] require that the APA "adequately assess the candidates' ability to effectively

perform the job role of the school instructional and improvement leader (2)." We interpret

"authentic" used in this way to entail the desire to see how novice administrators perform in real-

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[3] A full version of the California APA Design Standards are available at
http://www.ctc.ca.gov/educator-prep/standards/APA-Design-Standards-2016.pdf.

life circumstances, under the contingent conditions which cause them to use judgment that draws upon tacit and explicit forms of knowledge. Additionally, we interpret it to mean that the work happens within the school as an organization, and education as an institution, in relation to other members of that organization and the professional expectations of that role. For that reason, the novice administrator is not only drawing upon his or her own individual knowledge, but on group knowledge, as well, to guide his or her judgment.

In Scott Cook and John Brown's theory of organizational learning, put forth in their paper, "Bridging Epistemologies: The Generative Dance between Organizational Knowledge and Organizational Knowing" (1999), they argue that in order to understand how individuals within organizations, and organizations themselves, learn, a distinction between an *epistemology of possession* and an *epistemology of practice* must be made. They call for a shift away from an epistemology of possession, because of what they see as its limited, Cartesian approach to understanding knowledge and knowledge creation. Instead, they explain, to fully investigate how individuals and organizations learn, one must account for both individual knowledge, group knowledge, as well as tacit and explicit forms of knowledge. They further argue that while none of these types of knowledge can be transformed into the other, they do work in what they label a "generative dance" to produce new knowledge. They call that "knowing." We find Cook and Brown's theory particularly appealing for understanding Assessment Center, because it provides an analytical tool for parsing the types of knowledge that an authentic assessment hopes to elicit from a would-be leader, and a framework for seeing how these types of knowledge work together to inform the candidate's ability to enact leadership under contingent circumstances.

In this study, we hypothesized, given the deliberate construction of approximations to practice (Grossman, 2009), and the emphasis on group activities, that Assessment Center was constructed from an epistemology of practice. We set out to understand how Assessment Center approached eliciting candidate knowledge for the purpose of assessment. We believed that an assessment concerned with authenticity would be designed with rich opportunities for candidates to display professional "knowing," which would be visible through the assessment activities themselves, and the interpretations of those activities by the participants, including candidates and assessors.

Our data consist of observation, field notes, materials, and video clips from the Assessment Center activities that took place in Fall, 2015, and Spring, 2016. Video clips (n=16) and field notes (n=12) include case study and mock expulsion hearing preparation, presentations, and feedback sessions of several groups as well as PLI coach and instructor feedback sessions. Additionally, it draws upon data from the interviews we conducted before and after each Assessment Center with four PLI candidates/students (n=7) as well as three coaches (n=6) and two instructors (n=3) who participated in Assessment Center activities.[4] We considered each of these activities an opportunity for the performance assessment to elicit candidate "knowing" in the way that Cook and Brown use it. We have begun an iterative coding process, as prescribed by Corbin and Strauss (1990), to create initial codes based on Cook and Brown's framework, which we have refined during this initial phase and which we will continue to refine.

Preliminary Findings

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[4] Instructors are those who teach courses in the PLI program and coaches are experienced educators assigned to multiple PLI candidates/students as field supervisors for the duration of the program to guide them in applying theory to practice in their work sites and contribute to assessing their progress along with the instructors.

Eliciting Tacit Knowledge

It is clear that Assessment Center requires candidates to put into practice explicit and tacit knowledge to grapple with the leadership scenarios with which they are presented. Candidates are often required to use explicit knowledge that they have gained during courses by citing texts and data that they have encountered. They also draw on school law and appropriate procedures and protocols for interacting with colleagues and students during Assessment Center. How they use these pieces of explicit knowledge, however, requires them to draw on tacit knowledge for enactment of leadership in the moment.

Cook and Brown's conception of tacit knowledge is helpful here. They describe it as knowledge that is gained through the generative dance of knowing, but which the individual retains in order to enact it again. They give an example of the knowledge needed to ride a bicycle to illustrate their point. When a person learns to ride a bicycle, they argue, they have explicit knowledge of how a bicycle works. However, it is not until they actually get on and learn to ride that a tacit understanding of how their own body feels and works while riding is developed. While a bicycle rider is only "knowing" how to ride a bicycle in the moment of riding, a tacit knowledge of how to enact bicycle riding is retained by the rider for use at a later time.

For leadership candidates, it is hoped that tacit knowledge of leadership is gained through course assignments that require approximations to practice, fieldwork experiences, and elsewhere in the program. These experiences are designed to cultivate tacit knowledge in the candidate, which is then called upon during Assessment Center. We see this through the candidates' reports that the activities feel authentic and require immediate action, thereby necessarily calling upon both

explicit and tacit knowledge for leadership enactment. We also see evidence that tacit

knowledge is required by the activities in Assessment Center through the coaches' comments

about what they are able to learn about their candidates' development, by assessing their

enactment of leadership competencies in real time.

Candidates demonstrate tacit knowledge through realistic leadership experiences

Leadership candidates repeatedly remarked on the authenticity of the Assessment Center

experience during their interviews. Given our definition of tacit knowledge as that which a

candidate accesses during enactment, the realness of the experience for candidates helped us see

that Assessment Center requires candidates to call upon and create tacit knowledge.

One student described in this way:

...I do really think that in a lot of ways I appreciate Assessment Center because it is authentic, it is an authentic assessment, and it feels real. It feels like you're doing the work of a site leader, you're doing the work of an administrator, and it's not that theoretical piece.

Another candidate discussed the value of enactment during Assessment Center as a means of

eliciting knowledge she may not have otherwise tapped into. Her comment is reflective of many

of the interviews with students, coaches and instructors who again and again explained the value

of the realism of simulation exercises in which they participated.

I just can't say enough about how much our work as leaders in education rely on our ability to take information and quickly do something with it, and to present things in a way that makes people feel calm and empowered at the same time, and we have lots of different types of people and expectations and responsibilities, and you can't get that from taking a test. You just, you can't. You can't just be given something and write down what I would say or whatever, because you're always going to sound better on paper than you are when you're having to talk to someone out loud and go through and respond to somebody and be quick on your feet. So I think it's incredibly powerful to do the assessments this way and to give us real experiences that we can take with us into leadership. You couldn't do that any other way. So that would be an add-on to me, just to take that away.

Here the student points out the value she sees in the simulated experiences of Assessment Center.

Her comment that "having to talk to someone" and "be quick on your feet" is preferable to being

asked to "write down what I would say," shows that candidates are required by Assessment

Center to demonstrate their knowledge through their behavior, not just their written reflections,

in real time. This student, like many of the others we interviewed, saw this as both an

opportunity to demonstrate knowledge in a challenging performance environment, as well as a

learning experience that helped her become a better leader. In other words, candidates saw

Assessment Center as a moment of "knowing," in which they called upon tacit and explicit forms

of knowledge and created new knowledge through the "generative dance" in which Assessment

Center required them to engage.

Coaches see aspects of practice that were invisible before

Another theme that emerged from our interviews with coaches and instructors about the

Assessment Center experience was an identification of simulations as an opportunity to witness

tacit knowledge in action, or identify tacit knowledge that was lacking in candidates. One coach

described Assessment Center as a "different venue" in which you see candidates in a "different

light."

This same coach had worried about her candidate's ability to keep up with the coursework in the

program saw the her enact leadership knowledge during Assessment Center that hadn't been

visible to her before. After observing her performance during the mock expulsion hearing, she

remarked:

I was particularly struck by a… coachee, who is struggling in terms of keeping up with PLI, for a
lot of reasons. A lot of extremely valid reasons… But she was just sort of at the top of her game,

and she did the closing statement in the expulsion hearing, and she was terrific. She also took over facilitating her group when they were working on this case study. And so it's very reaffirming to see what incredible talent she has.

An example from another coach pointed to Assessment Center's power to unearth knowledge for leadership that might be hidden from view in a less authentic assessment. Her candidate was not struggling with coursework, but, rather, excelled in the traditional academic sense. Spring Assessment Center provided this coach with an opportunity to see this candidate's leadership knowledge in action, rather than to rely only on her written expression of knowledge.

It's interesting that watching her in small groups and what have you in my class, she contributed but she wasn't very outspoken when it came time to, let's share out. She didn't do a lot of that. And I was really impressed… She's a good student, don't get me wrong. She does really well on her paperwork et cetera, but watching her in her element, because she is the lead PD, and the way she handled it, she was confident, there was some humor there, she did an outstanding job. She's another one that stood out for me in that sense, because I was really impressed with the way she came across.

These data suggest that candidates and coaches see Assessment Center as an authentic learning and assessment experience, during which candidates are required to call upon tacit knowledge to enact leadership in the moment. These experiences challenge candidates to behave as leaders, and allow coaches to see aspects of the candidates' leadership development that were not visible to them through other types of interactions such as coursework, conversations, and even on-site observations.

Eliciting Group Knowledge

Another aspect of Cook and Brown's organizational theory of knowledge accounts for the way in which individual and group knowledge work together to inform "knowing" of organizational actors. They argue that knowledge lives within organizations that is larger than individual knowledge that any one person possesses. School leaders do not work in isolation, but, instead, build knowledge for practice with those with whom they work and in the context of the

organizational and professional expectations of their role. Assessment Center attends to group

knowledge through both the design and the enactment of the activities. Candidates are required

to work with others, by design, and are assessed as individuals and as a group. Candidates report

growth in their leadership skills and perspectives through these activities.

Group knowledge as a design element

Though all activities in Assessment Center are designed to elicit and create group knowledge,

group discussions and presentation are perhaps the clearest examples of this. During group

discussions and presentations, candidates are expected to build and demonstrate knowledge for

leadership as a group. Below is a description of a "Case Study Discussion Protocol." Candidates

use this protocol in a group setting to discuss a case study of a leadership dilemma in order to

surface the issues and challenges of school leadership in a particular context.

The purpose of this case discussion is to provide an opportunity for your group to have an initial dialogue about the challenges faced by Ms. Violet and Franklin School. First, you will hear a short report of each group member's initial thoughts about the case as you were instructed identify in the preparation directions. Then, there will be time for open discussion. During this time, we urge you to continue to focus on the underlying issues and leadership challenges.

Each individual will have 3 minutes (12 minutes total) to identify the 2-3 most important issues at play in this case, relating them to the course concepts & literature. In order to ensure that each person has the opportunity to share their thoughts, the 3 minute limit on the "whips" will be firmly enforced.

The group will have 12 minutes to continue to discuss the case as a group, focusing on the underlying issues and leadership challenges. This open discussion will be left to your group to manage.

The instructor/s will have 5 minutes to share feedback and insights into the group's performance

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In this activity, candidates have the opportunity to both demonstrate their own knowledge of

leadership and the literature they've encountered through coursework, and they are also being

assessed on their interactions with others and their capacity to build knowledge for leadership

with others. Unlike some assessments or pedagogical activities that require candidates to discuss their individual knowledge in order to see what they know as individuals, this activity, by design, assesses the group's ability to organize itself for learning, and to build knowledge for leadership as a group.

After an initial share out, the group has several minutes to discuss the case with which they are presented. This is an open discussion that is left to each group to manage. Leaving the group to manage itself is not only a way to assess organizational skills, but also to see how would-be leaders position themselves in relation to other adults to create relationships oriented for group learning. After the discussion, the group is then given feedback from observers about how they worked as a group, not as particular individuals who are there to share individual knowledge.

Students learn from one another during group activities

Group activities present opportunities for candidates to build knowledge with others and to demonstrate group and tacit knowledge for leadership. Students see their own knowledge as situated within a larger body of group knowledge, which is greater than them, but which they can access by working successfully within a group. For example, one student said:

I think the one task that sort of stood out to me was the, when we had our group conversation surrounding the case study, I think the one thing that stood out, and it was mostly just that we were, everybody sort of came in with their own perspective, and once we were sitting around the table and talking to each other about the case study, it was hard to imagine us having missed anything. Like, everybody brought up something that really meant something to them, and it created a really holistic image of what was going on. I was just impressed once we got rolling, how much people picked up on from the case study, and how many different pieces there were. Yeah. I was very impressed, because there was stuff that I missed, but somebody in the group had picked up on it clearly.

Here the student describes the value in working on the case study with others because "it was hard to imagine us having missed anything." He goes on to explain that within what appears to be a fairly well-organized discussion, building group knowledge is greater than the sum of its parts. As with many of the activities in Assessment Center, the process both unearthed candidates' knowledge and helped them create new knowledge. Group activities such as these placed a value on what could be created from carefully orchestrated sharing, listening and reflecting together, by providing feedback on both content and process.

Assessment for Organizational Learning:

Another way in which Assessment Center reflects an epistemology of practice is the built-in design for organizational learning. As candidates enact leadership through Assessment Center, knowledge is constructed by the program and its staff alongside the candidates. By interacting with candidates as they respond to the leadership scenarios with which they are presented, coaches and instructors build knowledge about the candidates, and about their own coaching and teaching. Additionally, the program and Assessment Center, itself, learn from the experience and adapt.

Assessment Center helps coaches and instructors develop their practice

Assessment Center is designed to both assess learning and to simultaneously create opportunities for learning. Coaches and instructors almost unanimously report that Assessment Center helps them learn about their students and their own teaching and coaching. For instance, one instructor noted that Assessment Center helps him prioritize particular aspects of leadership knowledge in his course during an interview after Fall Assessment Center:

The activities are all collaborative and they require multiple task management and time management… And all of those skills are essential to high-quality educational leadership. And it reinforces my practice in the classroom to be spending time on those things.

Then, again, this same instructor described a similar sentiment after Spring Assessment Center:

I find Assessment Center to be incredibly valuable as an assessment tool for me to assess my practice, and again, the course design, and the structures that we use to guide the students in a very short time, in 14 months, from being teachers to being credentialed, authorized, practicing administrators. You know? It's a scary responsibility.

Another instructor discussed the value in meeting with other coaches and instructors to discuss the candidates' progress during Assessment Center. This meeting is built into the design of Assessment Center, in order for the coaches and instructors to calibrate for the assessment activities themselves, and for them to hone their approach moving forward as individuals and as a program. She said,

I think I would just underscore the value that I as an instructor gain from the feedback session with the field supervisors that we do during our lunch break. Getting the thematic feedback from the other people who are involved in the process is just, I mean, I've never had that experience as a teacher before, and it's really meaningful for me and my practice.

Assessment Center informs program development

Assessment Center not only informs the individual practice of coaches and instructors; it also feeds into a cycle of group learning by the entire program. Over time, the program and Assessment Center itself are changed in response to the organizational learning that happens by various constituencies within the Principal Leadership Institute. For example, a few years ago, instructors were disappointed in the number of students who did not use open ended questions in the simulated post-observation conference. The curriculum was subsequently revised to include more practice and coaches followed up with the individuals directly to ensure more practice in their questioning strategies. The next year, instructors noted improved rates of questioning strategies.

Implications

Our early findings indicate that this study may have several important implications for the development of Administrator Performance Assessments. First, this study is helping us think about the nature of authentic performance tasks and assessment experiences. Using the epistemology of practice frame allows us to see how deliberately designed approximations to practice may have some advantages for assessing candidate "knowing" over the more widely-used practice of assessing video slices of practice and accompanying candidate reflections. Assessment Center affords the program the ability to generate scenarios that require candidates to draw upon individual and group knowledge, and the enactment of practice that is visible to assessors is not mediated through the lens of the candidate who may select the slice of practice to submit. While these approaches both attempt to capture authentic practice, it may be paradoxically true that intentionally designed approximations during which candidates must enact leadership competencies in the presence of coaches and instructors are more suited to revealing a candidate's tacit knowledge for practice than a video of his or her practice in a live setting. Our early findings indicate that it would be interesting to compare the dimensions of knowledge for leadership enactment that are visible in a live performance assessment such as Assessment Center and those which are visible through a documented experience upon which a candidate reflects.

Second, the study of Berkeley's Assessment Center raises questions about how current plans for the design and implementation of Administrator Performance Assessment in California and elsewhere account for group knowledge. Though video clips and descriptions of fieldwork, which are common artifacts required by larger scale assessments currently in use, are reflective

of the type of work done with and among other organizational actors, the value that Assessment Center places on both leadership knowledge for working within groups, as well as the knowledge created together by groups, seems difficult to replicate outside a simulated or real-time administrator performance assessment. Because organizational knowledge is key to administrator knowledge and successful leadership, it would be useful to consider the extent to which current and proposed APA models embrace an epistemology of practice or possession. Given the professional knowledge that is needed for leadership, which draws on both tacit and group knowledge, it may be useful to consider accounting for these in the designs of new APAs.

Finally, because Assessment Center is not only a powerful learning tool for candidates, but for their instructors and coaches, as well, it is crucial that the relationship between the administration of an APA and the principal preparation program are closely examined. For example, Assessment Center is embedded into the life cycle of a preparation program, which allows program leadership, instructors and coaches to learn and respond during the program to benefit the learning of candidates. Candidates, too, can learn from their performance in Assessment Center and develop their leadership practices during the course of the program as a result. Using a standardized APA across multiple programs in a state, which is administered by a national testing company, may preclude programs, instructors, coaches and students from learning from the assessment in a timely or detailed enough manner to develop their practice in meaningful ways.

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