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## A Duoethnographic Exploration of Two Counselor Educators' Growth in Assessment in Teaching

Phillip L. Waalkes, Daniel A. DeCino

Assessment in teaching is a challenge for many beginning counselor educators. Although many researchers have discussed the importance of student learning outcomes, few have explored counselor educators' experiences using assessment in their courses. In this duoethnographic inquiry, we engaged in a critical and reflective dialogue of our experiences with assessment. We aimed to acknowledge our biases, identities, and emotions related to assessment in transformative ways. The dialogue helped Phil gain theoretical and emotional perspective on assessment and inspired specific changes to his assessment practices including focusing more on process-based, low stakes assessment, developing clearer learning goals, and providing feedback from a phenomenological perspective. The dialogue helped Dan link past experiences of being graded to his relationships with teachers, explore his role in subjectivity and performance based assessments, and deconstruct memorable moments of assessment to further his identity development as a counselor educator.

*Keywords:* pedagogy, grading, student learning outcomes, assessment, counselor education

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2016) requires that accredited counselor education programs evaluate the effectiveness of their curricula by measuring student learning outcomes. The 2016 CACREP Standards focused on how programs can assess student learning in broad categories at multiple time points using multiple measures. In teaching, each individual counselor educator develops knowledge and skill outcomes for students that align with CACREP standards, creates student performance evaluation criteria and procedures, and grades student work (CACREP, 2016). In our view, assessment encompasses developing learning outcomes, designing evaluation methods to measure student achievement on those outcomes, and providing students feedback about their progress towards those outcomes. In contrast, grading specifically refers to the part of the process of providing qualitative and quantitative feedback on student work. Researchers have explored ways to assess student-learning outcomes as a counselor education program (Haberstroh, Duffey, Marble, & Ivers,

2014; Heller Levitt & Janks, 2012) and offered recommendations for evaluating student learning outcomes within various content areas (Barrio Minton, Gibson, & Wachter Morris, 2016). Yet, few have examined the personal journeys of individual counselor educators in their efforts to grow in their assessment practices. Although developing as a teacher is sometimes presented as learning a series of behaviors (e.g., creating a syllabus, grading, designing class activities, facilitating class discussions), growth in teaching is a complex process often requiring critical reflection, identity development, and accountability (McDonald & Kahn, 2014). Individual stories of growth in assessment in teaching, like the ones we present in this study, can help illuminate development in teaching as a process intertwined with behavior, identity, and philosophy.

Beginning counselor educators can feel overwhelmed in the time and energy-consuming process of teaching and have reported feeling challenged by grading, providing feedback, and setting standards

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and guidelines for students (Magnuson, 2002; Magnuson, Shaw, Tubin, & Norem, 2004). Assessment may prove more challenging if counselor educators feel unprepared for it by their doctoral programs. Beginning counselor educators who participated in a consensual qualitative research study conducted by Waalkes, Benschhoff, Stickl, Swindle, and Umstead (2018) reported not feeling prepared to assess student work by their doctoral teaching preparation programs. Similarly, counselor educators in Hall and Hulse's (2010) study on doctoral teaching preparation wished their courses on college teaching spent more time on grading, assessing goals and objectives, and creating assignments. Additionally, in their follow-up content analysis of counselor education articles on teaching, Barrio Minton, Wachter Morris, and Bruner (2018) found only a small (yet growing) proportion of articles focused on the topic of assessment of learning. The growing number of research articles published on the assessment of teaching may indicate a demand for more research surrounding this topic.

Developing in assessment may require more structured supports than what is currently available. For individual counselor educators to grow in their assessment procedures, it seems important to engage in critical and reflective processes (McDonald & Kahn, 2014). Similar to the way it is not acceptable to only recognize the accomplishments of counseling programs while ignoring areas for growth (Barrio Minton et al., 2016), individual faculty members should think critically about developing and assessing student learning outcomes. In this duoethnographic study, we provide our juxtaposed stories as both an example of a method of self-reflection and critical engagement with the ways that our contexts and experiences have influenced our assessment practices. We have set out to explore our personal histories as students and as educators to acknowledge our biases, identities, and emotions in transformative ways.

## Methodology

Duoethnography is a "collaborative research methodology in which two or more researchers of difference juxtapose their life histories to provide

multiple understandings of the world" (Norris, Sawyer, & Lund, 2012, p. 9). As opposed to attempting to uncover an objective truth in their findings, duoethnographic researchers tell stories about their life histories related to a particular topic in conversation with one another. These stories are polyvocal and dialogic in a way that creates *heteroglossia*, or a multivoiced critical tension (Bakhtin, 1981). Researchers dialoguing in a duoethnographic study are not the topics of the research, but are the sites of research (Norris et al., 2012). Rooted in the concept of *currere*, or an act of self-interrogation through examining one's past in dynamic ways to unpack and repack meanings, duoethnography views a person's life as a curriculum rooted in experience. In other words, the researchers reconceptualize the meaning they place on the phenomenon of interest through ongoing transformation as they examine themselves through duoethnography process. Through the juxtaposition of multiple perspectives as they question one another, researchers challenge their previously held beliefs about the topic to develop this transformed meaning. This process is ongoing and fluid with a focus on temporality as the researchers alternate between exploring their past and their present inside and outside themselves in interaction with others. Duoethnographic researchers invite readers to engage in the conversation by recalling and questioning their own stories. Accordingly, researchers do not impose conclusions, but instead allow readers to arrive at their own interpretations of the researchers' experiences.

Since duoethnographers share their personal narratives, they disrupt the metanarrative of the solitary researcher (or unified voice of multiple researchers). Instead, multiple voices allow multiple truths to exist within the text while inviting the readers to discover their own truths. This process of disrupting the metanarrative also opens the possibility for counternarratives of the dominant discourse to emerge. Accordingly, differences between the two duoethnographers are highlighted within the process. Unlike themes, which unify the experiences of participants in other qualitative methods, duoethnography does not seek to arrive at a resolution to the researchers' differences. Instead, differences exist alongside one another as multiple perspectives on the phenomena of interest. In an accessible and nonimposing way (Sawyer & Liggett,

2012), we aim to share our journeys of assessing students as beginning counselor educators to encourage readers to engage in their own reflective processes surrounding assessment.

### Data Sources

Our primary data source for this study was an ongoing shared electronic document where we wrote journal entries back and forth over a period of ten months, during the fall 2017 and spring 2018 semesters. For both of us, these semesters were our second year working as counselor educators. We did not have specific prompts for each entry. However, we engaged in three in-person conversations to conceptualize and define our topic before starting the journaling process. In our first few entries, we reflected on our current views on assessment. Throughout subsequent entries, we explored our own life histories of being graded and grading others as well as cultural influences on our assessment practices.

### Professional Profile of the Researchers

**Phil:** I am a White, cisgender, able body, male counselor educator currently employed as an assistant professor at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. This is my fourth year working as a counselor educator and my second year working at The University of Missouri–St. Louis. During my first two years as a counselor educator, including the year that we collected data, I worked at the University of South Dakota. This is where I met Dan. Growing up, I lived in middle-class neighborhoods in suburban Maryland. My high school in North Carolina was well-known for its nationally ranked SAT scores and rigorous academics. My parents instilled a strong work ethic in me through modeling and offered me encouragement for making good grades. My parents never forced college education upon me but highly valued it and presented it as the logical next step after high school. Many members on both sides of my family had college degrees going back multiple generations.

**Dan:** I am a middle-aged, cis, White, able body, male counselor educator currently employed as a fourth-year assistant professor at the University

of South Dakota. Growing up, I lived along the Front Range of Colorado. I am the first of two sons of two educated and hardworking parents. My schools (elementary, middle, and high school) were a blend of mostly White, middle- to lower-middle-class farming families and city kids from the east side of our largest nearby town. My parents always set high expectations for me and challenged me to accomplish my goals. While several members of my extended family on both sides earned Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degrees, I was the first person on my father's of the family side to earn a PhD.

### Trustworthiness

Duoethnography researchers believe that knowledge is situated in time, fluid instead of fixed (Breault, 2016; Norris et al., 2012). In other words, knowledge and truth are a perspective held by an individual at a specific moment in time, as opposed to static and universal. Therefore, truth and validity are irrelevant to duoethnographic research. Duoethnographers believe that traditional methods of establishing trustworthiness (e.g., member checking, bracketing) imply that there is a static truth (Breault, 2016). So, depth and self-reflexivity are the primary ways that trustworthiness in duoethnographic research is assessed. To promote depth and self-reflexivity, we purposefully maintained a prolonged level of engagement with our conversation and the data. Over a period of 10 months, we wrote regular entries back and forth in a shared document that ended up totaling 11 entries and over 13,000 total words ( $M=1227$ ;  $SD=480.41$ ). Additionally, we engaged in numerous in-person conversations over this period, building on our journal entries. Within our entries, we encouraged one another with questions, to unpack the meanings of our personal narratives, including questions on the motivations behind our assessment practices and philosophies. Through questions and critiques pointing out underexplored areas of potential depth, we challenged each other to be transparent and vulnerable and to seek further clarity in the meaning behind our experiences and the roots of our emotions and beliefs. During these

conversations, we remained intentional about stepping outside of our role as colleagues and into the role of critical sounding boards.

## Data Analysis

Breault (2016) emphasized that being transparent about inter-self-reflexivity provides catalytic validity, or the degree to which the research process focuses and energizes readers toward transforming reality (Lather, 1986). After the completion of our journaling and data collection, we both independently reviewed the sources of data and developed a list of meaningful moments that emerged. Then, we also both developed a list of ways that we have grown in our assessment procedures from this process. We met together to share and discuss our findings and made a plan for how to write our manuscript. In this meeting, we developed a loose structure for the flow of our findings section that allowed space for our different transformations. We decided what data was most applicable to our critical transformations and provided value to encourage other counselor educators to reflect on their own assessment processes. We cut information related to our opinions and musings and focused more on our explorations of our experiences and our cultural contexts. Afterwards, we found meaningful quotations from our data sources and formed them into a series of lessons representing what we learned from this process, similar to the way Kramer and Mangiardi (2012) presented their findings. We started with writing a few lessons and then met multiple times thereafter to discuss how to enhance our dialogic flow and emphasize our differences and transformations. Finally, we completed synthesizing and writing the rest of the findings and discussion sections in a similar manner of engaged conversations, to question and challenge one another.

## Findings

Below is a retelling of the important insights we gained from this duoethnographic project. These insights emerged from analyzing our data sources and are presented as *lessons* to demonstrate our

learning from this process (Kramer & Mangiardi, 2012). We decided to present our findings in terms of these lessons to provide us with space for more extended storytelling and discussion of our thought processes.

### Lesson 1: Assessment is Full of Unacknowledged Emotions

**Phil:** Our culture seems to view assessment in terms of the banking model (Freire, 1970), where the professors' knowledge is passed onto students through corrective feedback on graded assignments. Within this system, assessment is an objective process where we standardize tests and create rubrics for assignments, largely so that we can clarify expectations and learning goals. Yet, it also seems impossible to remove subjectivity from assessment. I want the grades I assign to be a reflection of the quality and effort of student work and I don't want to show bias toward certain students. I use rubrics and appreciate the ways standardization can make the process of assessment clearer, but I am still learning how to balance that with allowing space for students' individuality, background, and experiences.

One unique feature of how the banking model seems to interact with assessment is through the perception that it is an emotionless process. Grades on assignments are one of the primary ways counselor educators measure student progress and communicate progress to students. In some cases, grades send a powerful message to students that they need to improve or they risk being removed from their programs. Students often have strong emotional reactions to these messages. Yet, it seems to me, we do not talk about these emotions. I have rarely thought intentionally about my emotions and my students' emotions as I am creating or grading assignments. I also do not often have conversations with my students about their emotional reactions to their grades. A grade or a grade point average (GPA) can label a student and impact how they view themselves. Number or letter grades are connected to many students' senses of self-worth and self-efficacy in ways that can overpower deeper qualitative feedback. Even in graduate school, I wonder if many students' views of their grades (and

of their professors) are influenced by childhood interactions with parents or caregivers, including the expectations and pressures surrounding grades in their families. For some students, their emotional reactions to grades or their desire for straight As can cause intense anxiety. I hate that one number has so much power over some students in negative ways that can interfere with their growth as counselors. I want to lessen the power these numbers have for my students, but it often feels like I am fighting against the entire system of academia.

Growing up, I thrived on the encouragement and validation my parents offered me for my good grades. They praised me or gave me money for report cards of As and Bs. Sometimes, without thinking deeply on it, I assume my students' perspectives on grades must be similar. In other words, I often want to give my students As so I can validate them as humans and praise them for their work. In turn, there is a childlike part of me that worries that I am invalidating my students if I assign them lower grades, since that is how I would have felt growing up. When I do not acknowledge the role that emotions play in my grading, this childlike part of me is more likely to emerge as my first reaction to student work and can cause me to be a more lenient grader. I strive to remain objective in my grading by following detailed rubrics, but it is sometimes difficult to resist the desire to serve as a cheerleader to my students, by pointing out all they have done well. Is this what students need from me? Would they learn more from me if I was more critical?

### **Lesson 2: My Quandary: Navigating Grading Student Work as Art and Skill**

**Dan:** One dimension of our profession that has always struck me as confusing is assigning letter grades to performance-based classes. As counselor educators, we teach our students in prepracticum, practicum, and internship to use counseling skills (e.g., reflections of feeling) in an authentic way that is meaningful to them and helpful for clients. Yet, assigning official letter grades in these performance-based classes feels challenging for me. I wrestle with this grading quandary every time I teach practicum. For example, I can remember feeling stuck when confronted between determining an

“A” caliber reflection versus a “B” caliber reflection when reviewing students' counseling tapes.

For as long as I can remember, some have referred to the counseling process as either an *art* or a set of acquired *skills*. To me, art is experienced subjectively. Yet, a skill can be evaluated with precision across a standardized set of criteria. Thus, I find myself struggling to satisfy both worlds when evaluating students work. For instance, I remember one time, while reviewing a student's midterm counseling tape, they performed a rather interesting reflection of feeling in-session with a client. The students' reflection of feeling was unique to them, but also disjointed and muddled with excessive qualifiers. Previously in supervision, we had been working tirelessly to strengthen their reflections to be more concise and clear. Ultimately, the students' intervention resonated with the client and helped strengthen their therapeutic connection. In the end, I chose to use this example during our midterm meeting to help further their growth as counselors, rather than as a punitive moment graded through a standardized rubric. I speculate the more experience I gain, the easier it will become to navigate both perspectives. I feel like this part of my identity is still developing, and will do so well into the later years of my career as a counselor educator.

### **Lesson 3: Grades are Connected to My Sense of Self-Worth**

**Phil:** Through most of elementary school, my report cards were far from perfect. I struggled with handwriting and fine motor skills early on in elementary school. By the time I got to middle school, I was making good grades in honors classes at a suburban school in Maryland. I was proud of having a couple of report cards in eighth grade, where I got straight As. I felt competent and like my grades were proof that I was smart. However, one quarter in middle school, I earned a C in my art class and I felt dejected. That quarter, we completed a project where we wove a pattern using yarn, to create an animal of our choosing. Mine was supposed to be a giraffe. I remember feeling frustrated doing that project because I would frequently get my yarn tangled into complicated knots. It seemed like I would spend half of the time in class untangling yarn! It would get tangled to the point where I had to pull

apart work I had already done and start over. I noticed my peers completing their woven animals and moving on to the next assigned project while I was not even halfway done. I felt embarrassed. I was supposed to be smart, but I was not making progress. I worried that everyone was noticing how bad I was at this project. I started dreading going to art class. At one point, our art teacher pulled me aside and asked how my project was going. She said that I could sit with some friends, if that might help me get the project done. I liked sitting with my friends, but it did not help me make much progress. When we moved on from that project, I had less than a quarter of it completed and had not even started using the orange string for my giraffe. I can still vividly picture the light blue yarn woven on the cardboard backdrop, and how miserable I felt looking at it. I threw it away so my parents would not see it. This shame returned a few weeks later after seeing a C for art class on my report card, which was otherwise full of As.

#### **Lesson 4: School and Grades Early On: The Beginning of Self-Efficacy**

**Dan:** Looking back, there were several moments throughout my early childhood that influenced my approach to grading as a counselor educator. In elementary school, my report cards were average and sometimes slightly above average. Although I felt like I was doing fine with school, there were places where I struggled. In the beginning, spelling was a frustrating challenge. Later, my nemesis was math. For the most part, I was an *average* student and my experience with grades was neither adversely negative nor overtly positive, but I always felt the grades I received were fair assessments of my work. Later, I noticed *fairness* was a bedrock concept that anchored how I interacted with colleagues and students, and how I graded students' work. Although I had never thought about how this value became so important to me, my perceptions of receiving grades as a student have played a part with my grading practices as an educator. When I think about how I have managed to maneuver through challenging grading situations (e.g., addressing grading complaints from students), it largely stems from feeling as if I was treated fairly as a student earlier in my life.

Today, I am also discovering how detailed feedback versus shorter, one-word responses may provide students with additional support. This part of my grading journey stems from a teacher in high school who gave meaningful comments on my papers (e.g., “you are a good writer and have shared something that others can really connect with”) that I still carry with me today. In fact, her comments seemed to be early building blocks that reinforced within me that I could become a competent writer. Later in life, these comments generalized a bit and instilled within me that if I *tried hard*, I would greatly increase my chances of being successful. As a counselor educator, I try to inspire the same mindset in my students. Unfortunately, I have also learned not all students read my comments nor wish to consider my opinions as a source of support. While I am currently experimenting with what this part of my identity means (i.e., how to give meaningful, personalized feedback that promotes growth and critical thinking), I am fascinated by how previous life experiences, even from 20–30 years ago, influence who I am today. I believe we are alumni of experience, and these moments from my past can inform me in the present and in the future.

#### **Lesson 5: Self-Expression, Not the Status of Grades, Provided Me With Meaning**

**Phil:** I moved to the suburbs of Raleigh, North Carolina during the summer before high school. Many students at my new high school seemed obsessed with their class rank and standardized test scores. Teachers and administrators at the school would often point out how our high school had test scores that ranked as some of the best in the country. I rebelled against this culture. Spending hours on studying to get good grades seemed like a waste of time and effort to me. I wanted to have a good future and always cared about my grades, but I also rejected the way that my school focused on grades as status. I decided to game the system, doing as little work as possible to still make an A or B. I figured out a lot of study skills and short cuts that allowed me to do well on tests and assignments, despite putting forth minimal effort. I studied for tests before school and during classes and completed my homework in classes when there was down time. I learned how to fulfill all parts of a rubric so that

there were fewer ways that I could be marked down. I learned my teachers' preferences and areas of emphasis. Most of my friends cared deeply about their class ranks and were amazed by how little I seemed to care about my grades. For example, I would spend 1 hour working on a project and get an 88% on it, and my friend would spend 6 hours and get a 98%. I would say to him, "Is 5 extra hours worth 10 more points?" Looking back, I wonder if this mentality helped protect me from feeling hurt, since, if I did receive a lower grade, I could say that I did not put much work into the assignment.

During my last 2 years of high school, I developed an interest in creative writing. I wrote short stories and poems in my free time. I spent more time on them than I did on my schoolwork. Influenced by Kurt Vonnegut, I became interested in satire. So, I turned in papers that satirized the writing assignments in my English classes. I addressed all of the required components, but also poked fun at the assignments and my school throughout them. My English teachers loved this and encouraged me in my creative writing. I always wanted to get good grades, but completing these assignments provided me meaning beyond receiving a grade. I felt a sense of purpose behind my schoolwork as if I was critiquing a school that took itself too seriously. I wanted to find meaning in my life beyond a grade, a test score, or a class rank. I did not believe that competition on standardization evaluations should be what differentiated me from others, but that I should get to define that for myself.

### **Lesson 6: Graded on a Curve: Navigating Systems as New Faculty**

**Dan:** Starting my first full-time faculty job in higher education came with a steep learning curve. Learning new systems (e.g., faculty dynamics, student body, local culture, expectations within my department, establishing a research agenda, teaching courses) required a considerable amount of patience. One such area of growth for me was developing my grading philosophy and practices in a new department. I learned early on the quality of my relationships with students influenced the degree to which they accepted or rejected their grades. For instance, I noticed when I took additional time to inform students of my approach to assessment, they

were less inclined to dispute their final grades later on. Conversely, when I failed to spend time explaining my assessment philosophy, sometimes I was met with greater resistance. This set of possible outcomes became obvious to me the first summer I taught a course outside of my department. This intensive 4-week online summer class was replete with students I had never met. After the course ended and grades were final, I was notified that a student had filed a grade appeal against me. After the shock wore off, I realized I did not know this student at all, except that the name paired with the midterm and final exam scores. After reaching out to the student to clarify my position and explain why the student received that grade, the student withdrew the complaint. More often than not, I am reminded that the relationship in counseling is what matters most. I also learned that within the realm of assessment, the relationship matters more than I thought.

### **Lesson 7: Process-Focus and Coconstruction Can Empower Students to Find Their Own Meaning in Grades**

**Phil:** During the spring semester, I tried to take a more preventative and transparent approach in how I talk about assessment with students, especially in classes where I give out fewer As. I started acknowledging my viewpoint on the role of grades as useful information in the process of learning. On the first day of prepracticum class, I talked with students about how I planned to challenge them through my grading, because developing counseling skills is important to their future clients. I emphasized to them that I intended to push them through my grading to help them become more skilled as counselors. I emphasized ways to approach assessment and the process with a growth mindset and invited them to clarify the mindset they wanted to use to approach their process of learning. I hoped students would approach prepracticum with both a desire to get a good grade in the course and an awareness of how the skills learned in this course can impact their future careers far beyond their grades. I hoped these conversations would have taken some of the pressure off students in terms of wanting to make good grades, but it is hard to know if they have.

This duoethnographic process helped me step outside of viewing assessment in a postpositivist, banking model way. I took steps toward being more relational and process-oriented in my assessment, but I still have lots of room to grow. The traditional views on assessment my culture has instilled in me are challenging to escape. Yet, the path of least resistance in following this traditional viewpoint seems like it reinforces harmful patterns. Traditional methods of assessment, especially multiple choice tests, often do not take into account all of a student's abilities, knowledge, and experiences related to the course content and its application. On their own, they provide us with no understanding of an individual student's context, their emotions, their culture, and their experiences and future aspirations. Instead, I want to intentionally integrate my philosophy of teaching and beliefs about student learning into my assessment practices. I want my grading to push students, and also reward them for their hard work. I want to validate, encourage, and praise students, but I also do not want them to become complacent. I want to encourage students to discover internal methods of validation as opposed to external ones like grades. In some cases, I want my assessment to involve self-assessment and other social constructivist strategies that leave space for the experiences and perspectives of students, without overprivileging my perspective. At the same time, I do not want a student who is in denial about lacking counseling abilities to give themselves a free pass. I wonder how I can make my grading more coconstructed, without losing rigor or the ability to gate-keep.

## Discussion

**Phil:** It has been about a year since we have completed the year-long duoethnographic journal writing process and a lot has changed for me, including transitioning to a counselor education position at a new institution. Engaging in this process, which even by the end felt more conceptual than pragmatic, helped plant the seeds for a lot of specific changes over this last year. Additionally, having worked for a year in a counselor education program in an urban setting (my previous institution

was located in a rural setting) with a different student population, has helped to shift my perspective on assessment. I now view the cultural backgrounds of my students as more important to my assessment processes and recognize how bias in assessment procedures can serve as a barrier to academic achievement for many disadvantaged students.

Now, I am less focused on high-stakes assignments. Instead, I have shifted to creating assignments that require students to work hard to address all components, but do not penalize students through tough grading. For example, I now allow students to use their notes on tests or take tests in groups. For many students, high-stakes assignments are not conducive for positive mental, physical, and emotional health as opposed to smaller and more frequent low-stakes assignments. High-stakes assessments can stress students in ways that can inhibit a growth mindset. In contrast, low-stakes assignments may not inspire as much stress and enhance learning. Often high-stakes assignments facilitate an intense cramming process at the end of the semester that encourages unhealthy habits (e.g., losing sleep, eating unhealthy foods) as opposed to a more even level of work across the semester. So, now, when I create assignments like research papers or presentations that require substantial work over the semester, I include regular deadlines for completing components of those assignments, sometimes with opportunities for peer or instructor feedback. Ultimately, I view the learning resulting from the process students take in completing their assignments as more important than the product (i.e., their grade).

I have the power as an instructor to help set the tone for growth and to contribute to reducing students' stress based on the way I structure and talk about assessment. This mindset has required that I develop clearer and more concrete student learning objectives. In the first few class meetings, I share with students my goals in teaching the course, the learning outcomes I want them to achieve, and the rationale behind my assessment procedures. Finally, I now take a more phenomenological approach to my writing qualitative feedback on students' submitted assignments (i.e., sharing my reactions and what I noticed as opposed to evaluating the accuracy of content). This perspective aligns more closely with my social constructivist perspective on

teaching by placing me less in the role of the keeper of knowledge to be passed on to students and, instead, inviting students to combine my perspective into their past knowledge. I will still correct students who inaccurately understand course content, but this is less the focus of my feedback now. I hope this perspective empowers students to have more agency in viewing my voice as one of many within the field that can react to as they wish.

**Dan:** As I am immersed in pretenure responsibilities, this duoethnography has been an expedition of discovery and growth for me. Since I started my full-time career, I have remained at the same institution and have experienced a considerable amount of personal change even as the culture and standards here remain relatively constant. In this sense, elements that have remained the same have helped me compare and contrast my trajectory as a counselor educator and how I take more ownership of my assessment practices.

Early on in my career, assessment seemed to be a fact-based task. I anchored my grading approach on the facts of each student's work and situation. For instance, if there were seven assignments for the course, I focused on whether all assignments were turned in *by the due date*. At the time, I felt capable and competent as a counselor educator when all the numbers added up and students had completed their assignments. Despite handling any major issues that arose with students (i.e., plagiarism) and defining what separated A from B work, sometimes the bigger picture seemed less clear and I did not always consider how students' past experiences may be linked to their current training and future work as counselors. While I learned the basics of assessment in my doctoral program, I had yet to fully discover my ability to more critically evaluate students' work at deeper and more meaningful levels.

During the course of this duoethnography, I pushed myself to understand more about my assessment practices. Like peeling back layers of an onion, I explored and began to take account of *how* I formulated my thoughts about assessment. This process seemed to be most revealing and beneficial when I reconnected with previous life experiences of school and influential teachers. Looking back on the positive and negative interactions with those teachers and my current perceptions of grades was

disruptive and informative. For example, when I found my old report card I discovered that I no longer cared about the actual scores, (i.e., how many Os versus Ss my third-grade teachers gave me); rather, my relationship with her and the quality of our connection during that time in my life were much more important. Thinking about my relationships with teachers and assessment through this duoethnography compelled me to evaluate my own connections and relationships with students as a counselor educator. This dive into my interpersonal processes illuminated my own thoughts about student performance, relationships, and the power granted to those who assign grades. I also started to recognize assessment as a contextual and relational two-way interaction. This facilitated a greater sense of personal responsibility in my role as an educator. This new insight has led me to explore my bias (favorable or unfavorable) with individual students and the power associated with my bias and their grades. As a result, I also believe that I have become a more equitable grader because I am better able to account for those factors that influence my interpretations of students' work.

Finally, through this duoethnography I have also started to understand *why* I grade the way I do as a counselor educator. This part of the process will require ongoing and constant attention because I believe there are hidden, reinforced, and taken-for-granted thoughts and behaviors intertwined with my assessment practices. Analogous to my understanding of White privilege, uncovering the hidden factors that influence my assessment practices requires me to take a metacognitive perspective that links larger tacit and unknown systems with my everyday lived experiences. For example, now I consider my experiences and my students' experiences with grades in school as a reflection of a bigger, more expansive value system embedded with society. Often those who have higher GPAs are revered as more *valuable*. Regardless of whether this value is true, it also presents a host of challenges when educating counselors-in-training, where we expect every student to grow, be vulnerable, and learn from their mistakes. Now, I am better able to recognize a constellation of lifelong grading experiences that are constantly reminding students (to varying degrees of awareness) the value of being a high achiever is different than the value of growing in

dynamic and meaningful ways. This part of my discovery process feels daunting; however, there were moments during this project where these insights started to emerge. For instance, this project has exposed how my assessment practices are influenced by our cultural values. Many students believe their self-worth is tied to their grades and the system (i.e., GPA requirements of counseling programs, scholarship applications, and financial aid applications) reinforces this value. In many facets of our society, arguably the product and outcome (i.e., proof of a diploma) are perceived as more valuable than the journey along the way. This insight has helped me begin to take a more reasonable approach to assessment and my responsibilities, while also focusing on my professional relationships with students.

### Implications

Although our findings are largely personal and may not be transferable to other counselor educators, we believe that our critical dialogue process may be a useful example for other counselor educators in a variety of contexts. Counselor educators can engage with their colleagues or others in a duoethnographic process in various content areas (e.g., research, teaching, professional identity, ethical practice) and for a variety of purposes (e.g., growth in skills, clarifying values, developing identity, a structured method of growth in relationships between mentors and mentees). For example, many university administrators are asking faculty to explore alternative methods of evaluating their teaching to supplement student evaluations of teaching. Counselor educators can engage in duoethnography with another educator as a structured method of evaluating and reflecting on teaching that could provide deep information and insights. Although rarely utilized in empirical research in counselor education, duoethnographic inquiries can provide rich opportunities for critical exploration and reconceptualization in numerous contexts (Norris et al., 2012).

Duoethnographic researchers typically invite readers to engage in a similar transformative reflective process themselves. Readers can decide what implications and meaning our dialogue has for them based on their development as teachers, their identities, and their contexts. Readers may choose to view

some of our discoveries and behavior changes presented in the discussion section as implications for their own practice. Additionally, our journeys may inspire reflection on their own contexts and experiences with assessment. To help facilitate this purpose, here are a few reflection questions:

1. What were your experiences with receiving grades throughout your schooling? What emotions have you felt related to receiving grades? How have these experiences and feelings impacted you as a counselor educator?
2. How did your parents/guardians or others perceive your grades? How has that impacted your assessment practices and philosophy?
3. What value did you place on your grades? What did you believe your grades reflected about you?
4. What are your reactions to our findings? Are they similar or different to what you have experienced in your own assessment processes and the analysis of your life history with grading and being graded?
5. How has your doctoral training influenced the way you assess students? How has the culture and expectations of your current program influenced your assessment practices?
6. How do you believe assessment impacts your students? How might you be intentional about shaping this impact in your assessment practices?
7. How can you integrate your andragogic beliefs with your assessment practices?
8. What is one component of your assessment practices you want to change next semester?
9. How has reading about our journeys of transformation and engaging in this process yourself changed the way you think about assessment?

### Limitations

Clarifying values and reconceptualizing meaning is an often messy and ongoing process, full of internal inconsistencies that are sometimes challenging to put into words (Krammer & Mangiardi, 2012). We often found ourselves struggling with the public presentation of these messy and personal conversations. At times, we felt tempted to present ourselves as having assessment figured out in neatly

packaged stories, as not to reveal our more vulnerable selves, but we challenged one another to avoid this outcome. Ultimately, this type of self-censorship may still be present within our findings in ways we were not aware. For example, we may not have deeply explored the ways that place influenced our assessment practices, as we were not sure how much was appropriate to reveal about the institutions and programs where we work. Additionally, although we sought to address all parts of the assessment process in our duoethnography, our conversation generally drifted toward our experiences with grading. Our histories and values related to other parts of the assessment process (e.g., creating student learning outcomes, giving and receiving feedback outside of graded assignments, designing assignments and courses) remain more unexplored. Accordingly, the development of these areas for counselor educators represent potentially rich directions for future research. Furthermore, although we have attempted to highlight our differences throughout our process, in many ways we are similar. We both identify as cisgender, able body, White males with middle-class upbringings who were working at the same institution during the data collection process. A duoethnography on this topic between two researchers with a mixture of different personal (e.g., gender, sexual orientation) and professional (e.g., geographic location of university, program expectations) identities may have illuminated more of the diversity in assessment practices within our field. Finally, it is important to recognize that this exploration of our assessment practices is part of an ongoing process. We have presented our thoughts and feelings during 2 years of our professional careers as counselor educators. Our meanings, perspectives, and opinions of our assessment practices will continue to evolve as we do, contingent upon our time, place, self-reflective practice, and development (Krammer & Mangiardi, 2012). With this in mind, we encourage readers to evaluate the potential broader implications of our findings in light of our identities, institutions, and the moment in our careers when they were created.

## Conclusion

In this duoethnographic inquiry, we sought to reconceptualize our beliefs and transform ourselves by engaging in critical conversation surrounding our experiences with assessment as former students, counselor educators, and lifelong learners. The often messy process of individual development in teaching and assessment in counselor education is relatively unexplored in empirical research. This study represents a deep exploration into our assessment beliefs and practices as counselor educators and we hope it offers readers an opportunity to explore critically their own experiences and beliefs with assessment. In our process, we uncovered new parts of ourselves by juxtaposing our experiences that have led to more student-centered behavioral changes in our teaching, and more congruence between theory and practices in our teaching.

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