

THE LITERACY ASSESSMENT THAT COULD: HOW ONE PROJECT CHANGED MY UNDERSTANDING OF MY PAST AND PRESENT STUDENTS AND LED TO A NEW APPROACH FOR TEACHING INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

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Current educational policies, and the classrooms that must implement them, are obsessed with assessment. In this autobiographical article utilizing the *currere* method, I explore how a case study assignment in a literacy assessment course during my master's program in elementary education (a) shifted the way I thought about what counts as evidence of capability, (b) influenced the way I now teach assessment to pre-service teachers, and (c) affected the importance I now perceive for this approach in the ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) era.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In the winter of 2010, I took a literacy assessment course as part of a master of science degree in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis on elementary education. Most of the students in the course were part of a new, integrated undergraduate/graduate (IUG) program that invited students in the special education program to take additional courses and graduate in five years with both a BA and MA. This program also provided an additional reading specialist certificate for the state of Pennsylvania. Some students in the class were already practicing teachers pursuing only the reading specialist certificate. A few of us, myself included, were taking the course for reasons not related to pursuing a certificate.

This course was one of a series in the language and literacy education segment of that IUG program; one of its many purposes was to disrupt the deficit discourse of literacy assessment and instruction (Shannon, 2015). Course readings included Afflerbach's (2012) *Understanding and Using Reading Assessment: K-12*, providing a broad overview of common reading assessments; Gallagher's (2007) *Reclaiming Assessment*, describing Nebraska's use of portfolios to track adequate yearly progress (AYP); Hall's (2009) *Listening to Stephen Read*, documenting the influence of the assessors' beliefs about reading development as they interpreted a child's reading performance; Johnston's (2012) *Opening Minds*, exploring the power of the language we use with our students in discussing their development in our classroom; and Overmeyer's (2009) *What Student Writing Teaches Us: Formative Assessment in the Writing Workshop*. We also read additional articles that collectively troubled the underlying assumptions and implementation of response to intervention¹ (RTI).

Multi-tiered instruction and the RTI sequence of interventions are widely implemented among current national instructional policies. The WIDA Consortium (2013) has defined RTI as "a systematic, data-based assessment and intervention framework that seeks to prevent academic and behavioral difficulty for all students through high-quality, research-based instruction, early intervention, and frequent authentic assessment of students' progress" (p. 5).

RTI is structured as three levels (tiers) of intervention, each progressively more individualized and intensive. Implementation of the tiers varies across schools, but, in

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theory, advantages to RTI are that (a) interventions can be implemented rapidly, (b) students who may have disabilities can be identified earlier in their school careers, and (c) students who are experiencing difficulties due to inadequate instruction will not be mistakenly identified as disabled. Additionally, RTI is meant to release students from interventions as soon as goals are met, resulting in a return to Tier 1 status as soon as possible. The degree to which any of these goals are met depends in large part on the way schools implement them.

In actual practice, Tier 2 or Tier 3 is as likely to be used as a label for a student as it is for the intervention program. The interventions are reviewed at varying lengths of time, so a return to Tier 1 instruction for a given child is not necessarily individually timed, and nationally, there has been no decrease in the overrepresentation of minority children in special education programs as a result of this or any other programmatic change.

THE ASSIGNMENT

The core assignment for the course was a case study in which each of us worked with a child to discover data regarding his or her capabilities in literacy. The assignment included elements that were highly structured (e.g., the Roe and Burns Informal Reading Inventory) and elements that were highly open ended (e.g., collecting any available data on what the child liked to read through any method we chose). The mediational nature of the texts listed in the previous section and the underlying—but definitely not concealed—purpose of the course as a way to disrupt deficit discourses were reflected in the ongoing challenge to “think about what you want to know and how you might gather evidence to address it” (course assignment feedback). The project itself was intended to have us explore ways assessment tools and resulting data can be manipulated to reveal what we want them to reveal: capability, deficits, or a combination. We received the following instructions:

Conduct a study of one student’s efforts and abilities in learning to read and write. The minimum requirements for the case are to conduct an interest interview/inventory, complete an informal reading inventory, conduct a running record or miscue analysis at the appropriate level, collect and analyze samples of the student’s writing, organize your results, and make judgments about the student’s current reading and writing capacities in particular contexts. (course rubric)

The project included coaching from Dr. Shannon. The written communication concerning the first meeting was typical:

We want to converse with our case, asking her about her day...to tell us about an incident or a topic she thought about. Break some ice and start a modest relationship. Tell [the student] that you are learning to become a teacher and need his or her help.

Another reminder, which came a few weeks later, is similar: “Conduct the [running records] or [miscue analysis] and ask . . . what they remember. Only ask the questions that were not answered during the retelling. Otherwise [the child] will think you’re not listening.”

The readings I mentioned above played a key role in the way I approached and interpreted the data I gathered during the assignments. Collectively, they converted me to the understanding that everything about students is potential data as we search

deeply for information about what children can do, the context in which they reveal their capabilities, and what they can potentially do next.

MY OWN BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

My student teaching experience began at a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) boarding school in the heart of the Navajo Nation through a program that involved a year of extra coursework in multicultural education, specifically focused on the Navajo culture. That experience led to teaching fourth grade in a regular, Arizona public school not far from the BIA school. This public school was attended almost exclusively by Navajo children.

Although I had no training in teaching English language learners, these two experiences positioned me as a teacher of culturally and linguistically diverse students. When I began teaching in California two years later, I was “grandfathered” in as a teacher of ELLs when the Crosscultural, Language, and Academic Development Certificate (CLAD) was introduced. I continued to teach students labeled as learning disabled, English language learner, gifted, and Title 1 in a regular fourth grade classroom. I typically had 34 students in a class. I loved my job. I had a translanguaging classroom. I was not and am not fluent in any language other than English. However, I am fluent in knowing when a group of children are pulling on their Hmong resources to make sense of a learning task, when they are using this strategy for non-academic purposes, and when they are, like grown-ups in committee meetings all over the world, doing a little of both around the table.

I initially knew that the assessments the district used to produce data about my students were flawed because the instructional design (and the integrated formative assessments) I used at the time² revealed capabilities that countered the information in their files. I did not yet know why, and I did not know what to do about it.

In the winter of 2010, my son Milo was in second grade. His teacher, Mrs. V, was both experienced and insightful. We had a good rapport, which included our mutual concern about Milo’s journey with writing. It was not his ability to secure his thoughts on the page that was troubling; it was Milo’s handwriting—especially his lack of word boundaries—that was problematic for his age and grade level. When readers have to spend a great deal of time making sense of someone else’s printing, we tend to make blanket assumptions about the quality of the individual’s message. Students who do not write neatly tend to be perceived as inferior creators of text³ (Markham, 2016). To complicate matters, in order to avoid writing any more than necessary by hand, Milo (and likely many other children like him) kept his written pieces quite brief, although not unreasonably so. In short, Mrs. V and I knew that, when Milo left Mrs. V’s classroom, he was in danger of being positioned as a “struggling writer.” What Mrs. V and I believed was that Milo was actually a “struggling pencil user.” Given a keyboard, Milo produced longer, more detailed texts. Mrs. V gathered writing samples I could use for the case study, and we agreed that I would share my case study conclusions with her to add to her already rich understanding of Milo as a reader and writer.

THE LITERACY ASSESSMENT THAT COULD: MY EXPERIENCE

First and foremost, Milo and I enjoyed ourselves during this case study. Milo is an identical twin, and I did not often get a chance to talk with Milo about school without the conversation becoming a group discussion. He and his twin, Ben, were in the same classes together. So, the case study was a time for the two of us to talk about Milo’s thoughts and his work without Ben’s thoughts winding their way through the

conversation (although Ben did participate occasionally, as you will see in Excerpt 3). Our first conversation lasted well over 30 minutes. It covered general discussions of writing and reading, conversation about his interests, and also discussion of the pieces of writing we had collected. An example of a conversation about writing follows:

Excerpt 1

Me: I was thinking about writing. So, here are my questions. What things are good to write about?

Milo: Everything.

Me: Everything?

Milo: Except for mean stuff.

Me: Oh. Ok. Do you have some favorites?

Milo: Stickmen, cardboard boxes, imagination, basically anything interesting.

Me: What's your favorite kind of writing?

Milo: Writing books and comics.

Me: What kinds of books? Because there are books that are about...

Milo: Adventure books!

Me: Oh, and...

Milo: And wizards and even stickmen books.

Me: Mm-hmm.

Milo: And books with creatures that come straight out of my imagination.

As a teacher, I realized this first excerpt provided some useful information about the kinds of topics I could offer Milo to elicit the longer pieces of writing that would provide rich, detailed data about his capabilities. I knew right away that talking to my students individually about the kinds of things they like to read about, to write about, and to imagine was a kind of formative assessment that I had sometimes used unintentionally. In the course of this conversation, I reflected that information like the details Milo provided during this interchange was far more powerful because I used it intentionally.

In teaching, we use interest inventories to try to get at this information; when I teach my undergraduate students about conversations like this one with Milo, I use that label. I call it an *interest inventory interview*. I tell the pre-service teachers they can have students complete a printed interest inventory, but they should treat that paper as just one data point. I teach that the after-paper conversation is what provides the opportunity for rich, deep data to be revealed. Another exchange with Milo will illustrate.

Excerpt 2

Me: Where do you do your best writing?

Milo: Where do I do my best writing?

Me: Mm-hmm.

Milo: I usually do it when I am trying to do good handwriting so that my writing can be like one of the best on the board.

Me: Explain that to me. Does your teacher put the best writing up on the board?

Milo: No, but...

Me: She puts all of the writing on the board.

Milo: Yeah, but I want to make something that she could say to herself, “That might be the best one.”

Me: So, one of your...

Milo: Even better because I usually do sloppy writing.

Me: Uh-huh. So you want to make her proud.

Milo: Yes.

Me: So, one of your purposes for writing is to make the teacher happy.

Milo: Yes.

An interesting aspect of this moment—as he revealed to me his awareness of his handwriting as a component of his writing that may obscure the “best one” nature of his writing—is that he revealed it to me as an answer to a question I did not ask. The question I did ask, “Where do you do your best writing,” became unimportant in that moment, because the question he clearly needed me to ask was, “What are your hopes and fears about your writing?”

This moment came 20 minutes into our discussion. I remembered similar moments when this had happened to me naturally when I was a teacher. They had changed the way I approached instruction with a particular child or shifted my perception of the child’s motivations for behaving in various ways in my classroom. These insights are extraordinarily valuable data points. For example, should another education professional assert, “Milo does not care about his writing,” pointing to Milo’s handwriting as evidence, I have data that refute that conclusion. If there is a problem with “volume of writing production,” there is some other reason for it. Indeed, I learned from this moment that Milo has the capability to care deeply about what others think of his writing and to take that into consideration as he works.

I began to understand the incredible importance of two basic assessment questions: “Tell me more,” and “Explain that to me.” Understanding the way in which every interaction with a child is an opportunity to learn more about the individual’s literacies, I went looking for information about Milo’s reading habits in a very non-traditional way. I looked in his bed.

This is a page from one of the data sections in my assessment of Milo’s literacy capabilities:

What Milo Reads

Milo brings reading materials to bed. The following items were found in his bed on the morning of April 13, 2010.

- *Ask: Arts & Sciences for Kids*. Cricket Magazine Group (periodical)
- *How to Draw Cartoons*, by Sid Hoff. G. P. Putnam & Sons (how-to book).
- *A PIZZA the Size of the SUN*, by Jack Prelutsky. Greenwillow Books (poetry)
- *Cartooning for Kids*, by Marge Lightfoot. Greey de Pencier Books (how-to book)
- *Wild Ride: A Graphic Guide Adventure*, by Liam O’Donnel (teen graphic novel)
- The funny pages of the Sunday, April 11, 2010 *Centre Daily Times*.

From this information I concluded that Milo likes to read a variety of genres (e.g., poetry, non-fiction informational texts, how-to books). As part of this, I realized that I had stumbled across evidence that Milo was reading books about how to *do* writing.

Michael Bahr (2013) in his TEDxSUU talk, “Thinking Outside the Box Requires a Box,” explained that we cannot have the sort of epiphanies that move us to create outside of a given set of constraints without a deep understanding of the constraining

rules. He gives an example of Pablo Picasso, who first *mastered* painting in the style of classical realism before breaking out of that with cubism. Graphic novels convey an extraordinary amount of meaning visually, but they also include writing governed by genre-specific rules. Learning to use writing within the confines (the box) of the genre of graphic novel provides a specific writing context. As Milo also learns about the rules of writing (boxes) for other genres, he has opportunities to develop a level of mastery within each genre that can eventually lead to writing creatively in ways that intentionally break those rules (writing outside the box).

From the textual clues of the top bunk in Milo's room, I learned that he was interested enough in the rules of one of these genres that he would go to the library, find books on producing that kind of writing, take them home, and read them in his bed. I wondered what I would find if, on those days when cleaning out desks seemed the best course of action (often towards the end of the grading period when children knew they had a completed missing assignment, but just could not find it), I noted on a card what types of literacies were evident in their desks, along with the titles of any print texts. What if I could get a print out of all the books a child had checked out over the course of a grading period and then conference with the child about his or her response to the books, leaving space open to reject books. What clues might I find to support construction of an educational context that might reveal more student capability?

Towards the end of the project, Milo and I did a writing process project together centered around a comic strip that he created. We co-created a check-list rubric for that comic strip before he began, and as he worked, we talked about what he was doing and why. The following excerpts are from these conversations: the first while working on the rubric (see Appendix for the co-constructed rubric) and the second while comparing the rubric to one of his drafts.

Excerpt 3

Milo: A good comic has sound effects, a wavy line to show movement, speech bubbles and, in certain scenes, words that you have to look at all the details to find—sort of like this one [looks through a book to find a particular page] here.

Me: Okay, so these are other comments by characters in the background.

Ben⁴: Yeah, but sometimes they're characters in the foreground.

[The boys overlap each other recalling examples from Pokémon and Zelda comics.]

Milo: Another thing that makes a good comic is sudden . . . or random movements [shows me a movement when a character takes off a costume and reveals himself as another kind or character].

Me: What are some things that are part of a comic that would be considered part of all good writing? Or what makes it a good story?

Milo: It's really hilarious. And the writing goes along with every single bit of the picture—unlike wax and dye or water and oil.

In this excerpt, I saw what Overmeyer (2009) described in teacher Pam's work with her class as they co-constructed a rubric. This joint rubric production may be a better formative assessment tool than the rubric will ever be as an analytical tool for writing already produced. What I learned from Milo, as he generated a list of what

constitutes a good comic, is that he knew an extraordinary amount about the rules of the genre and the purpose for some of those rules. In our final meeting, we had this exchange:

Excerpt 4

Me: Is there anything else here you think you might want to change or do differently in your final draft?

Milo: I could put the sound effects for wave. I could put the background. I could put a bubble around it. (Giggling) And, I say that this is hilarious enough already because it is sort of weird that you'd see a ninja guy acting normal.

Me: So, you're satisfied with the level of hilarity.

Milo: Yeah, and the writing goes well with the picture⁵ as shown by this one (points to a middle frame).

During this project, I met with Milo only five times. We talked about five pieces of writing he had produced at school; crafted a rubric, a rough draft, and a final draft of a comic together; completed both an IRI and a running records assessment; and had a heart-to-heart about Milo, reading and writing, and his place in school. I never looked at any of these activities in an educational context the same way again. They had become unmoored from the contexts in which I had known them before. I had already completed running records with some of my fourth grade classes. I had years of experience doing writing process lessons with my students. But, the conversations taught me that if I did an assessment with such running records and came away without richer information about what the assessment experience meant to the student, I had left some of the most potentially rich information ungathered. If I did not have information about what the child knew he could do, why he might want to do it, or what his feelings were about doing it, then I was not finished. Much of what I had learned about Milo and his writing came not from the writing, but from what he had to say about it and around it.

As our students write and talk in class, we have the opportunity to create everyday spaces for these conversations. We probably do not have 30 minutes to set aside at regular intervals to talk to each student separately, and some would not respond to us in that context anyway. But we do have opportunities to have such experiences in brief, casual conversations that we make part of the learning environment. As students are working or during open class discussions that are part of a lesson or even during playground duty, we can look for additional examples of capability and fluency with the literacies of our students' lives.

ESSA AND THE SHIFTS IN INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN AND DISCURSIVE POSITIONING REQUIRED OF FUTURE TEACHERS

In a recent publication by the Council of Chief State School Officers (Mole, MacDonald, & Cook, 2016) titled *Discerning—and Fostering—What English Language Learners Can Do with Language*, the authors point out specific skills teachers will need in order to meet the assessment and instruction requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), especially pertaining to reclassification decisions. Put simply, future teachers will be (a) gathering the assessment data critical to deciding when a child should be classified as an English learner⁶ (EL) and should be exited from that program and (b) assuming responsibility for monitoring the reclassified student for continued language proficiency development across content areas for up to four

additional years. The nature of the needed data requires that the child's classroom teacher do the gathering—an ESL specialist cannot gather this kind of data.

The types of data gathered must include rich examples of capability across academic disciplines, with their content-area-specific genres and literacy tasks. These data must be “complementary to, and not duplicative of, language uses targeted on the state [English Language Proficiency (ELP)] assessment” (Mole, et al., 2016, p. 4). The “evidence-gathering processes and tools should be useful throughout the year for formative purposes” and should “help educators regularly examine and recognize a range of proficiencies in target language use,” rather than focusing at a specific target level of proficiency to the exclusion of others (Mole, et al., p. 4).

This approach to gathering data about a student's language use and proficiency is quite different than most current approaches, which tend to rely heavily on an ELP exam for decision-making purposes. In fact, currently, 29 states rely on this exam alone to decide when to reclassify students from English learner to English language proficient (Mole, et al., 2016)—the decision of when to reclassify excludes the classroom teacher entirely. To prepare teachers for their new role, finding new ways of framing the process of assessment and supporting a new understanding of the integrated nature of assessment and instruction must be part of teacher education programs going forward. The discourse of documenting existing student capability and supporting its further development already exists in educational programs that seek social justice and equity for all students.

THE INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN AND ASSESSMENT PROJECT TODAY

The literacy case study lives on, many iterations later, in the same course at the same university in Pennsylvania. It continues as part of a series of courses at that university that disrupt the persistent and troubling deficit discourses that surround students in Tier 2 and Tier 3 programs in K-12 public schools.

It also lives on at my university in my course titled Instructional Design and Assessment for All Learners. Small modifications have been made because my students are earlier in their programs than students in the Pennsylvania class. They have not yet had literacy methods courses or a field experience or practicum. So, although I teach them to conduct the Roe & Burns (2011) Informal Reading Inventory (8th edition) and a running records assessment (Clay, 2000), I have them choose one or the other to implement. We focus on *noticing* student capability in the results.

I have my students begin with the writing portfolio, and I share with them what Milo shared with me so they won't be afraid to ask questions and have conversations with their students, attempting to see a specific piece of writing as being less the focus of the conversation and more a “talking stick”⁷ about writing. I share what Milo said and what I learned from those moments, so my pre-service elementary education students will have a better understanding of the importance of listening to their students as they collect evidence of capability.

I send them back for the interest inventory interview, I share with them audio of an interest inventory I did with another child, and we talk about what we learned as teachers when the child declared herself to be a soccer player but then, in answer to another question, reluctantly added that she wasn't actually playing soccer at the time because her mother had accidentally missed the sign-up deadline that year. We talk about how knowing this soccer capability, along with her desire to position herself as part of the soccer-playing population, could help us find new ways to reveal her literacy skills to us through instructional choices we would make going forward.

In short, the project remains an opportunity for my pre-service teachers to begin to understand all interactions with our students as opportunities for discovering rich data about their capabilities.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Vygotsky wrote that learning happens not in a straight line, but in fits and starts—that it takes a crisis of thought for new socio-emotional-cognitive development to occur. For me, that crisis began with a critical conversation with a wise, observant, and proactive teacher who explained that one of my sons could become the victim of deficit thinking. That crisis was fueled by my own realization, as a former elementary teacher, of the speed with which a learning disability can acquire a child (McDermott, 1993). I, thus, needed the right tools to solve a very personal problem: how to prevent a misdiagnosis (per medical model discourse) of my son, including the inappropriate Tier 2 interventions attached to that labeling that would pull Milo from his regular classroom.

To develop new conceptual understanding requires transformation. For my current students, I have Wiggins and McTighe (2005) to back up Vygotsky and me as we explain the transferable nature of *understanding*. Sometimes our own development of this understanding occurs gradually, and at other times it comes suddenly—an epiphany in which we experience a moment of consciously reinterpreting past events (“Oh! When my student did that thing, it was because of this thing. I now understand differently.”). These moments of clarity are exceptionally helpful when teaching pre-service teachers because they give us chained events to share with them about real students and the real, imperfect, constantly-learning fourth grade teacher I once was.

When I share with students all I learned in assessing Milo that spring, I also share with them an incident that causes deep regret. I had a student who was acquired by the ADHD label, based on a completely inadequate assessment. I knew the assessment tool was inadequate when I used it, but it was all I was offered at the time, and I did not have the professional development or life experience yet to know who could provide me with something better. I share this story with pre-service teachers so they will know that assessing capability, which includes amassing evidence of what the child does well and the contexts in which these accomplishments take place, protects the child and positions the teacher as an advocate, avoiding the lingering regret of “I could have done more.”

My report supported Mrs. V’s observations and assisted her in collecting similar data in her classroom. Detailed evidence of Milo’s writing capability was successfully communicated to the following year’s teacher. However, Milo was siphoned into Tier 2 for “writing delays” in fourth grade when he left his charter school for a public school in the same district. Milo was referred to Tier 2 instruction, a pull-out program in which he lost 45 minutes of literacy instruction once a week with a group of students who did not share his specific issues relating to the physical production of writing. The meetings that placed him in Tier 2 in fourth and fifth grades were contentious and manipulative, with implications that, if I declined to have Milo participate in the intervention, the teacher would be freed from any responsibility for his continued writing development.

Thus, LD had successfully acquired Milo in the vulnerable moment of a change in schools. In fifth grade, however, Milo’s teacher listened to my concerns about his unfounded Tier 2 placement, read Milo’s work looking for capability, and successfully argued that he be released from the Tier 2 intervention. Milo viewed her as his own

“Ms. Honey, like in *Matilda*” (Dahl, 1988). I still see her as a “telling case” (Rex, 2000) of what one teacher can do when her internalized personal discourse emphasizes capability and her professional skills enable her to act on her conclusion.⁸ It is imperative that we provide all of our pre-service teachers with opportunities to acquire the skills to recognize capability and that we instruct them in the discursive tools that will enable them to elucidate the capability data they have gathered over the course of multiple types of student-teacher interactions to others in the educational community in ways that promote appropriate, robust, and meaningful instruction of the child.

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Appendix:

Milo and Mom's Rubric for Comic Strips

- ___ sound effects
- ___ wavy lines to show movement
- ___ speech bubbles
- ___ words you have to look at the details to find
- ___ sudden or random moments
- ___ hilarious
- ___ writing goes well with pictures

¹ RTI is an intervention program implemented as part of a multi-tiered instruction (MTI) approach. I highly recommend the WIDA Consortium's (2013) RTI document, a relatively balanced explanation of the program and its underlying beliefs, as well as a resource for implementing RTI within a linguistically diverse classroom.

² I had complete control over my literacy curriculum, and although I was provided with texts for math, science, and social studies, I was given freedom in how and when to use those materials. This made multi-modal and cross-disciplinary units easier to design and implement, such as a study of John Muir through non-fiction literature, related environmental science, and California and national history.

³ I do not address literature linking handwriting, visual perception, spelling, and/or reading here because Milo, the focus of this study, did not exemplify these kinds of connections. His spelling skills were at or above grade level in and out of context; the content, grammar, and punctuation of his writing were typical for grade level; and his reading skills were above grade level.

⁴ Ben was at the table during all of the writing project meetings. Therefore, according to the unwritten rules of Ben and Milo, it was his project too, although he did not do any of the actual writing.

⁵ From the co-created rubric

⁶ I switch terms from *English language learner* to *English learner* to accommodate the language used in the CCSSO document (Mole, et al., 2016).

⁷ Pulled from a Native American tradition used in councils about sacred topics, the talking stick gave the speaker the right to speak uninterrupted and the duty to speak reverently and purposefully about the topic.

⁸ Milo today is a student at a large and fairly typical public high school in Utah. He is taking a mix of honors and AP courses, including honors English. Given the choice, he types his assignments.