

## **edTPA? Good Grief!**

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Over the course of six months, edTPA went from being an abstract jumble of letters thrown around to describe some assessment that we were going to have to do at some point before graduation (yes, the conversations were that uncertain) to a very concrete mountain that each member of my cohort was expected to climb triumphantly, in spite of the fact that the road to the top was still in the process of being built. In the beginning, I tried to pretend it didn't exist, in the middle I found myself grappling with how to best fit into a model that didn't seem to appreciate who I was as a teacher, and in the end I accepted that I had to jump through the hoop of fire at the end of the road if I wanted the medal of state certification hung round my neck. In psychology, they'd say I went through the five stages of grief and loss---denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Now how's that for a resounding endorsement for edTPA?

### **Denial**

I remember hearing the acronym, edTPA, for the first time at the end of the 2013 spring semester. It was presented in my fieldwork class as something to keep in mind, something to read up on, and something that the state of New York was still trying to finalize. Such wishy-washy conversations ("wishy-washy" would be a Tier III term according to the Common Core, no?) made it even easier for me to deny edTPA's existence. How could edTPA be real when no one, not even my professors, seemed to be able to confirm what was required to complete the looming portfolio project? While I was correct that there was very little knowledge about what the portfolio would entail, I was quite wrong when it came to just how real edTPA was about to get. Thus, with start of my 2013 fall semester, edTPA, much like grief, began to invade every facet of my life in a less-than-favorable way.

### **Anger**

Early discussions about edTPA often focused on a need for concrete examples of what we were being asked to achieve through the development of this portfolio. Time and time again, the response was simply that while the portfolio had been piloted, we were the first cohorts having to complete it for certification, and so there was no precedent. Simply put, there was no baseline.

The anxieties and tensions surrounding edTPA rose so much during class meetings that our once amicable cohort began to turn in on itself. It wasn't uncommon for a class discussion to be completely overtaken by yelling and finger-pointing because the pile of unanswered questions continued to grow. When will we have the equipment to film our lessons? How do I cite my sources within each commentary? What do we do if we don't pass a section and are no longer working with the same group of students we used for our initial portfolio submission? What platform do we upload from? The list grew with every week of the semester that passed. In short, the Office of Teacher Education didn't have answers, the TESOL K-12 program didn't have answers, and from everyone's best guess, the state of New York didn't have answers.

As the list of unknowns grew, I began to notice a palpable difference in the attitudes of the members of my TESOL K-12 cohort. By October, I was sitting alone in my graduate courses because our community had begun to deteriorate. My anger, and the anger, of my colleagues had hit a critical mass.

### **Bargaining**

As I developed my lessons, I decided that maybe I could still put my own spin on this very restricted endeavor. Maybe if I was able to focus on something related to social justice it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe if I started my project earlier, I would reap the benefits of having more time to reflect on what I had done, making my commentaries stronger. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

The bargaining hit a high point when my colleagues and I began to discuss the enormity of trying to complete and submit this portfolio in addition to a 25-page Masters thesis at the start of 2014. With each class that passed, new arguments for why the portfolio should take the place of the thesis were presented, and each week that we were left without an answer, tensions increased. The edTPA monster crept in a little more, and I moved my chair a little further away from the people with whom I was supposed to be learning.

### **Depression**

I completed the teaching of my five-lesson edTPA mini-unit in mid-October. I remember it well because as anyone who has had to complete this portfolio will tell you, nothing went as planned and my anger quickly turned to defeat.

On day one of the unit, the camera I borrowed from Teachers College failed me, leaving me with 45 minutes of blurry video content. On day two, two of my focus students were absent. On day three, my class time was cut short due to an unexpected school schedule change. On day four, my iPhone ran out of memory, cutting my video short, and to round out the unit, day five was pushed back a week due to other school activities that my coordinating teacher deemed more important than my completing my unit.

While such issues aren't uncommon in classrooms where you're a push-in ESL teacher, due to what you're expected to accomplish with edTPA, they are incredibly destructive. At the conclusion of my lessons, I put everything on a shelf on my desk, uploaded all the videos to my laptop, and ignored it for six weeks. I was so upset about it that I couldn't even bring myself to look at it. How was this mess supposed to represent who I was as an educator? How was it supposed to help me become certified?

### **Acceptance**

Eventually I accepted that edTPA wasn't going away. Eventually, I pulled the mass of instructional materials, student work, and notes off that desk shelf. Eventually I began to carefully organize them into piles and stacks, to edit hours of video, and to dig through the fifteen rubrics that comprise the edTPA portfolio requirements so as to prepare for writing commentaries about planning, instruction, and assessment. Eventually, I accepted that I was going to have to cram my multi-modal, social justice-themed, English language arts ESL lessons into a rigid box, and the only way to do that was to realign my attitude so as to find a way to use this portfolio process to further my own teaching practice.

I would be remiss not to also share that I truly loved the unit I developed for edTPA, and that my students successfully engaged with the language and content in ways that amazed me

and helped me to reflect on my teaching practice. That being said, I taught in classrooms both in the United States and abroad before I joined the TESOL K-12 program at Teachers College. This prior classroom experience armed me with the resilience and the practical know-how that helped me to bounce back from the multiple roadblocks I encountered while completing edTPA. I cannot even fathom trying to complete this project as a student teacher in charge of a classroom for the first time.

For this reason, the biggest aspect of edTPA that I have accepted is my responsibility to talk about it. My responsibility to further the conversation by sharing my experiences so that people understand why it is flawed, why it is unrealistic, and most importantly, why it will likely dissuade incredible educators from carving out their unique place in our school communities.