

The edTPA Assessment for Special Education Pre-Service Teachers

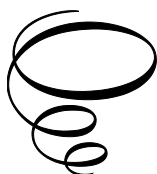
The edTPA Assessment for Special Education Pre-Service Teachers:

Creating a Successful Portfolio

By

Stephen J. Hernandez

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INTRODUCTION

Procuring a teaching credential typically involves completing a state approved teacher preparation program and passing one or several teacher certification exams. Each state determines the evidence that the prospective teacher must submit to be awarded the credential (Wilson, Hallam, Pecheone, & Moss, 2014). While completing a teacher preparation program is a given across each state, the other measures of teaching competency can vary. These measures take on the form of skills-based assessments intended to measure content or pedagogical knowledge, some form of student teaching, and/or an actual assessment of teaching practice.

While most teacher candidates are not in tune with the above manifestations in policy, one of the more direct impacts of this move towards pre-service performance-based assessment is the adoption of edTPA (Rosenberg & Walther-Thomas, 2014). The initiative behind edTPA is the desire to see teacher candidates demonstrating their “professional readiness to meet the academic needs of all students the first day they become the teacher of record” (Rosenberg & Walther-Thomas, 2014, p. 77).

As such, the need for pre-service teachers of special education to receive a passing score on the Special Education edTPA portfolio assessment has become a requirement for teacher certification and/or the successful completion of a degree preparation program in many states. The creation of a successful, high-quality edTPA portfolio includes the incorporation of teaching and assessment strategies geared towards student(s) with disabilities, or as called in edTPA parlance, the “focus learner”. This book will provide the Special Education pre-service teacher and edTPA candidate with detailed guidance on the development of a high-quality portfolio. The reader will find a litany of best practices and proven strategies that teacher candidates of special education are sure to find highly beneficial in creating their own portfolio.

edTPA – Why does it exist?

With increased pressure for teacher preparation accountability, there was a push to launch the standardization of a national evaluation requirement for pre-service teachers. Since 2012,

there are 764 Educator Preparation Programs in 40 states and the District of Columbia participating in edTPA. The long-term expectation is that education boards throughout the United States will adopt edTPA as a mandatory requirement for teacher licensure (2016 edTPA Administrative Report, 2017). The developers of edTPA, the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE) state that the scores edTPA candidates receive on their ability to plan, teach, assess and reflect on their instruction are significant predictors of later teaching competency. The goal is to identify those teacher candidates who have the necessary competencies to succeed at the beginning of their careers (2016 edTPA Administrative Report, 2017). SCALE states that ‘edTPA is not about theory. It goes beyond classroom credits to ask teacher candidates to demonstrate what they can and will do on the job, translating into practice what research shows improves learning’. (edtpa.aacte.org)

With the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 and the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004, teacher preparation has had to undergo significant change in the United States. First, NCLB put the emphasis on standards-based instruction and teacher accountability for the student’s demonstration of the mastery of such standards. This was then followed-up by the IDEA and its requirement that teachers meet its highly qualified teacher standard (Sayeski & Higgins, 2014).

Changes in the teacher preparation process are also impacting teacher preparation programs themselves. In many respects, the move to standards-based instruction in preschool through the secondary grades is mirrored in the accreditation requirements now present in higher education (Sayeski and Higgins, 2014). This process has taken on an added dimension with the consolidation of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) into the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, 2014). How this process will impact on the accreditation process is still to be determined but it most likely will not diminish the scrutiny that teacher preparation programs are under nor will it lessen the elevation of standards that schools of education employ in designing their programs (Hernandez, 2018).

The above changes mostly represent indirect factors that will impact teacher candidates. One of the more direct impacts of this move towards pre-service, performance-based assessment is the adoption of edTPA (Rosenberg & Walther-Thomas, 2014). For many teacher candidates the edTPA portfolio assessment process took on a high stakes dimension in 2014 when a passing score on edTPA became a requirement for initial teacher certification in New York and Washington State (edTPA, 2013).

Since then, 16 other states have either adopted statewide policies requiring a performance assessment for aspiring teachers or are actively considering such a step with a total of 400 teacher preparation programs in 40 states using edTPA to a varying extent (edTPA, 2019).

The initiative behind edTPA is, as noted by Rosenberg and Walther-Thomas (2014), the desire to see teacher candidates demonstrating their “professional readiness to meet the academic needs of all students the first day they become the teacher of record” (p. 77). More specifically, on a broad scale edTPA is designed to accomplish a variety of goals including;

- Developing a culture of meaningful inquiry around teaching practices.
- Using evidence/data to inform continuous candidate improvement.
- Developing and monitoring profiles of candidates.
- Aligning candidate performance with high-leverage teaching outcomes.

The creation of a high-quality edTPA portfolio fosters the development of novice teachers who can demonstrate pedagogy that addresses the needs of diverse learners in the classroom of today. This includes the need for teacher candidates to demonstrate a wide variety of inclusive teaching skills including culturally responsive teaching as well as the specifics of Response to Intervention (RTI), Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and other best practices (Dukes, Darling, & Doan, 2014).

Finally, and as reported by many of my students over the years, edTPA provides insight into your ability to effectively teach. Many of my former edTPA candidates actually come back to me a year or more after they have passed edTPA, completed their degree requirements and secured a teaching position, and report that their supervisors considered them advanced beyond their level of experience, attributing their exemplary skills to the work involved in creating their portfolios. Make no mistake about it, preparing a high-quality edTPA portfolio is a lot of work! Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. Creating a successful edTPA portfolio is a challenging endeavor, but the result leads to a heightened level of skill that better prepares you for your teaching career and an enhanced level of professional growth and development.

Let me conclude this section by saying that I am not looking to argue whether edTPA is the correct manner in which to determine if you are ready to teach students with disabilities. This book is not intended to debate that issue. What this book is designed to do is help you, the pre-service Special Education edTPA candidate, to create a high-quality portfolio that will

receive a passing score. That being said, let's move on and discuss what is edTPA and then get into how to make it all happen.

edTPA – What is it?

edTPA is a portfolio assessment that attempts to measure the preparedness of teacher candidates in over twenty-five different content areas including Special Education. Pre-service teachers have several undertakings to accomplish on the path to becoming a successful educator. Initially, they need to develop and apply knowledge of subject matter, content standards and subject-specific pedagogy. Next, they need to develop and apply their knowledge of students, including varied strengths, needs, and interests while also considering research and theory about how students learn. Finally, they need to reflect on, justify, and analyze evidence of the effects of instruction on student learning (SCALE, 2013). Together, these undertakings are incorporated into the edTPA assessment process within the context of five dimensions of teaching (SCALE, 2016). As such, video evidence is potentially critical in the assessment of all five dimensions.

The first dimension of teaching being evaluated is the planning of instruction and assessment. This is where you establish the instructional and social context for student learning and this includes lesson plans, instructional materials and student assignments and/or assessments. As part of this first dimension, you must demonstrate how your plans align with content standards as well as the specific goals and objectives delineated for students with special needs. In addition, your planning must note how your lesson plans build upon students' prior academic learning and life experiences as well as how the planned instruction is differentiated to address student needs. In addition to the documented artifacts that help support your claims as detailed in your Context for Learning lesson plans, instructional materials and commentaries, you need to illustrate the comprehensiveness of your planning through the video evidence of your instruction.

The second dimension that is assessed through an edTPA portfolio is the instruction and engagement of students. For this dimension, this is where video evidence is front and center. Here is where you need to include in your portfolio one or two unedited video clips of 15-20 minutes from the learning segment. In addition, dimension two requires an analysis detailing how you engage the student in learning activities as well as a commentary regarding subject-specific pedagogical strategies used to facilitate the student's learning.

The third dimension that is evaluated in the context of an edTPA portfolio is the assessment of student learning and reflecting on your own teaching. You are evaluated on how you have provided evidence of the assessment of student learning through the documented evaluation criteria that are used in the analysis of the student learning process. How you provide evidence of assessment and the evaluation of student learning varies from one subject-specific handbook to another but in general one has the option of including video, audio or written feedback as evidence of student learning. In addition, you must discuss how you provided, elicited and monitored student responses to develop a deep understanding of the subject matter. This is the “feedback” component of the portfolio.

The fourth dimension being assessed through your edTPA portfolio is an analysis of your teaching effectiveness. This evidence is reviewed within the framework of your commentaries for the planning, instruction and assessment tasks. More specifically, in Task 1 (planning), you justify your plans based on your knowledge of diverse students’ learning strengths and needs as well as principles of research and theory. In Task 2 (instruction), you explain and justify which aspects of the learning segment were effective, and what you would change. In Task 3, you use your analysis of assessment results to inform the next steps for individuals and groups with varied learning needs. As in the case of the first dimension, video illustrations of effective instruction are a key ingredient in how well your portfolio is evaluated.

The fifth dimension of teaching that you are evaluated on is your ability to develop the use of academic language in students. You are evaluated based on your ability to support students’ oral and written use of academic language to deepen the understanding of subject matter. For this dimension, your competency is determined from the portfolio’s commentaries and videos that explain and provide evidence of how students demonstrate academic language using student work samples and/or video recordings of student engagement.

These five dimensions of teaching are assessed through your edTPA portfolio using several sources of evidence that include various artifacts and commentaries. Specifically, the planning task looks at the instructional and social context, lesson plans, instructional materials, student assignments, and the Planning Commentary. The instruction task relies on video clips of your teaching as well as the instructional commentary. Meanwhile, the assessment task looks at the evaluation criteria used to analyze student learning, an analysis of the whole class assessment, an analysis of learning and a sample of feedback to three students, and finally the assessment commentary.

As noted, the scores you receive on your edTPA portfolio are reliant on many items. How well you score on these items will determine whether you receive a passing score on your portfolio. Scores are given within the realm of the 15 rubrics contained in the Special Education handbook. The scores received correlate with your readiness to teach and are described as follows:

- A level one score is representative of the knowledge and skills of a seriously struggling candidate who is not ready to teach.
- A level two score represents the knowledge and skills of a candidate who is possibly ready to teach.
- A level three score represents the knowledge and skills of a candidate who is qualified to teach.
- A level four score represents a candidate with a solid foundation of knowledge and skills for a beginning teacher.
- A level five score represents the advanced skills and abilities of a candidate who is very well qualified and ready to teach.

As described above, the progression from a score of one to five is indicative of your expanding repertoire of skills and strategies as well as a deepening of your rationale for what was taught and reflection on the effectiveness of the teaching. In general, a score of one is illustrative of a candidate who lacks an individualized, student-specific focus, and engages in fragmented and indiscriminate instruction rather than teaching that is integrated, intentional and well executed, whereas a level 5.0 score is indicative of someone who plans, delivers, and analyzes instruction in an individualized, well-planned manner and is very ready to teach.

The other factor you need to consider with regard to the scoring of your portfolio is the current cut score in the state you are considering for teacher certification. In 2019, SCALE recommends a cut score of 42 but many states set different cut scores, including some which have gradual increases in the scores that are built in to occur over the course of several years. For example, New York State had a cut score of 38 in 2019 for the Special Education handbook but this is scheduled to increase to 40 in 2022.

What is so “Special” about the Special Education Portfolio?

For the Special Education portfolio, you will need to address all of the components of the general edTPA portfolio with some modifications. As with all of the other edTPA content areas, the Special Education portfolio will be centered on the planning, instruction, and assessment of three to five

lessons. The big difference though with your portfolio is the fact that you will create it for *only one student, a.k.a., the “focus learner”*. This is a major difference with other portfolio content areas that are required to develop a portfolio for whole classes and/or small groups along with two to three focus learners. For the Special Education edTPA portfolio, the focus learner is a student with a disability. In most states and for most teacher preparation programs this focus learner can be of any age up to 21 as long as the student is receiving special education services authorized under the IDEA. This can include services provided through early intervention, special education preschool, or at the school age level. We will discuss the focus learner and how to develop your portfolio with this student in mind in much more detail in subsequent chapters.

The other significant difference between the Special Education portfolio and others is in relation to academic language. In this case, the Special Education portfolio requires the candidate to address the communication skills of the focus learner. Finally, there are differences in the specific wording and central point of many of the rubrics that will be used to assess your work. We will discuss all of these aspects of your portfolio in much more detail later in this book.

CHAPTER ONE

PREPARING FOR THE CHALLENGE

What to do now to prepare for the creation of your portfolio

Many of you will be required to pass edTPA to graduate from your teacher preparation program and/or achieve teacher certification. This is why edTPA is considered to be a high-stakes assessment. It is contingent then for you to address this challenge with intent, commitment, and seriousness. It is imperative that you read, absorb, read again, and if necessary, read again all of the resources provided to you by edTPA so you are thoroughly familiar with what you need to do when it comes to constructing a successful portfolio. With an edTPA portfolio, the product needs to be yours and yours alone without any input from faculty regarding your portfolio's quality or substance. You can receive guidance and clarification regarding the nature of the portfolio requirements and what the content of a high-quality portfolio should look like, but not whether your portfolio is meeting these conditions. In the end, the nature of your portfolio is truly an outcome of your own making. Failing to do so will have significant negative consequences.

The publications listed below will be described in brief below and then in more detail in subsequent chapters.

Your reading list assignment includes the following edTPA publications from SCALE:

- Special Education Making Good Choices;
- Special Education Handbook;
- Special Education Understanding Rubric Level Progression; and
- Special Education Communication Skill Resource Guide.

These documents are to be read in the order listed. The first document, Making Good Choices is, in comparison to the other resources, a relatively brief (35-page) overview of the essential elements of edTPA and what your portfolio will need to consist of. The second document, the Special

Education Handbook, is THE source for constructing your portfolio. Yes, “Making Good Choices” is an excellent introduction to the portfolio but it in no way substitutes for not reading the handbook.

The handbook provides a review of the edTPA assessment, details the structure of the handbook, and delineates in a clear manner the three portfolio tasks you need to complete. The handbook then moves on to describe for each of the three tasks (planning, instruction, and assessment) the specific aspects of your portfolio that you need to think and write about, and how your work will be assessed via the rubrics that are embedded in each task.

In addition to the detailed instructions regarding each task, the handbook also delineates your professional responsibilities as an edTPA candidate. It is extremely important that you become immediately familiar with these responsibilities, particularly the need to protect the confidentiality of all involved in the portfolio development process (including you), and get written permission to videotape any and all children and adults that may appear in the video. Do this as soon as you are placed in your instructional setting! There is no need to wait on this, when it could take weeks to get the signed releases back from parents. An additional and equally important responsibility is to ensure that the portfolio you construct is your own work and that none of it is garnered from someone else. Lastly, you must make sure to cite your sources (more about this in the next chapter). Failure to fulfill and abide by these responsibilities can result in serious consequences for you, not limited to a failing score on edTPA but also legal ramifications including the possible inability to receive teacher certification.

After the handbook describes your professional responsibilities, the next component illustrates a very easy to read “Special Education Evidence Chart”. This chart must be reviewed before you construct any aspect of your portfolio for it tells you what the exact specifications are for each part of your portfolio. As I note above, I will provide you with much more depth regarding the handbook as we progress through each of the three tasks.

The next publication, the Understanding Rubric Level Progression (URLP) document is in all respects the scorer’s guidebook. This resource tells you, rubric by rubric, what you need to do to receive a score on each of the 15 rubrics across the three tasks of the handbook. It does this by identifying what evidence and artifacts will be reviewed to determine what score you will receive in each rubric. Constructing a high scoring portfolio is significantly enhanced through the use of the URLP resource. It allows you to discern what you need to do to increase your chances of receiving a high score on each rubric. As with the handbook, I will discuss the URLP

guide in much more detail as we review the work to be done for each of the three tasks.

As an aside, one very important thing to keep in mind is the fact that each subject area that can be assessed by edTPA has a different set of guidance documents, particularly the handbook and URLP. For this reason, it is wise not to compare and contrast your work with someone else's, especially if they are constructing a portfolio for a different content area. Doing so will likely lead to confusion, as I have seen in my work as an edTPA coordinator, as well as stress and anxiety when you compare your work to that of someone else who is not a Special Education edTPA candidate.

As a teacher candidate completing a Special Education edTPA portfolio, the process requires you as the teacher candidate to identify and collect subject-specific evidence of the effective instruction and assessment of your focus learner from a learning segment of three to five lessons. This means you need to submit authentic artifacts from your clinical field experience (student teaching) and create commentaries that provide a rationale to support their instructional practices based on the learning strengths and needs of the focus learner. This portfolio has several overriding aspects to it from planning, instruction, and assessment inclusive of the justification of planning decisions through the use of data, to the inclusion of the focus learner's communication skill, and finally the analysis of your teaching to plan your next steps of instruction.

Your edTPA portfolio needs to address the planning, instruction, and assessment of your work with one "focus learner" while making sure to address the need to incorporate into your planning, instruction, and assessment how you will teach and assess communication skills that are relevant to the content you are teaching. In addition, you must ensure that you collect and use data, theory, and research to justify your planning and inform your instruction. Finally (and this is required for multiple reasons, including having backup in the event you receive a failing score), you must make sure to have multiple portfolio artifacts, including video footage of your instruction, work samples from your focus learner, examples of your feedback to the focus learner, use of the identified communication skill by the focus learner, and assessments of their work. Having this cache of artifacts will provide you with multiple sources of evidence to consider when completing your portfolio and as already noted, provide you with backup just in case you do not meet the cut score for your work. More about this in Chapter 6.

Now that we have reviewed the basic characteristics and ingredients of your portfolio, let's move on to discuss in detail the work you need to do for Task 1 of your portfolio.

CHAPTER TWO

PLANNING YOUR INSTRUCTION (TASK 1)

The work you do for Task 1 sets the stage for your entire Special Education portfolio. Completing Task 1 requires you to create a Context for Learning (4 pages maximum), a three to five lesson sequence for the one focus learner inclusive of the planned assessment(s) as well as the materials and supplies to be used in the lessons. You also need to write a Planning Commentary of no more than 12 pages. Let's now discuss each of these Task 1 components in more detail.

Context for Learning

The Context for Learning is a maximum four-page document (including prompts) that gives you the opportunity to describe the setting that you are working in and the focus learner you are working with. Once you have addressed all the prompts in this document, its total page length will likely come close to four pages. Let's look at the Context for Learning and discuss what information you need to provide beyond what the directions may be telling you.

Prompt 1.a. asks you to provide information regarding the context in which you are teaching to the extent that another educator can understand your decisions regarding the learning segment and requests that you address several sub-prompts. The first of these asks you to note the type of setting and gives you several options such as an elementary classroom, job site, etc. Now, if you only responded to this prompt at its face value, you would simply provide a one-line statement saying something like "The setting is a self-contained first grade classroom". What I urge my edTPA candidates to do is provide in-depth information regarding not just the classroom but also the school and district. Yes, state what type of setting it is, but add to this with descriptions of the classroom, school, and district demographics specific to the students and community. See an example of a response to this prompt from one of my edTPA candidates who I will call Jill;

[The setting in which instruction of the learning segment will occur is a fourth and fifth grade self-contained classroom, located within a suburban public elementary school. This is one of two public elementary schools within the district. All of the students attending this school reside in the community. Demographic statistics reflect that the school has sixty per cent of fourth graders, and fifty-three per cent of fifth graders meeting English Language Arts state standards. While, seventy-eight per cent of fourth graders, and seventy-three per cent of fifth graders are meeting Math state standards. Approximately five per cent of the students in the school are English Language Learners, and three per cent of students are provided with free school lunch. Within the specific classroom [in which] I am placed there are eleven students. There are four fifth grade students and seven fourth grade students. The classroom was originally designed to have a 12:1:1 ratio, which is defined as twelve students, one lead teacher, and one assistant. Currently, it is under-enrolled by one. In addition to the eleven students there is one lead teacher, one teacher's assistant, and two one-to-one paraprofessionals who help support two of the students with academic and behavioral needs. The students range in age from nine to eleven. All of the students in the classroom have an Individualized Education Plan. Four students are identified as having Other Health Impairments, three students are classified with a Learning Disability, two are classified as having Speech and Language Impairments, and two students are classified with Autism. While eleven students are in the class, only seven are in the classroom for all academics throughout the day. One of the students is in a fourth grade general education class for reading, one is in a fifth grade general education class for math and reading, and two of the students are in a fourth grade general education class for all academic subjects and specials. The other students receive their academic instruction individually or in small groups. They do attend specials such as science, art, music, and chorus with their grade level peers outside of their classroom. The teacher and the teacher's assistant take various groups or individual students and provide the instruction while the aids supplement the instruction of two students, and manage their behavioral needs. In addition, the entire class has a classroom behavior management plan in which students earn rewards for appropriate behavior.]

As you can see from this response, the candidate provided a comprehensive illustration of the district, school, and classroom setting. I urge you to do the same. Skipping over the bullet that simply asks you to check off the location of the school where you are teaching, the third bullet is asking you to describe your role in the focus learner's instructional program. Be explicit in your response to this like Jill. See her response below:

[My role in the focus learner's instructional program will be to teach English Language, Arts and Math, to him individually, as well as to his fourth grade

learning group composed of one other student. I will be part of an instructional team made up of his classroom's lead teacher, teacher's assistant, and his speech language pathologist. This student does not have a one-to-one paraprofessional. Throughout my instruction I will be addressing his IEP goals and learning style. The focus learner is a multisensory learner. Due to this I will be presenting information in a combination of visual, auditory, and tactile strategies. I will be working with the focus learner on his IEP goals in the areas of reading, writing, math, and speaking and listening skills. Reading instruction will consist of developing skills for decoding and comprehension. Writing instruction will focus on generating ideas, organization of a paragraph, and ways to increase word-finding skills, as well as working on his IEP goal of writing a paragraph. During math the focus learner and I will be working on the use of manipulatives to increase his understanding of addition, subtraction, and multiplication. In addition to these academic goals we will also work on communication goals of building his academic vocabulary in all subjects, and responding appropriately to WH (who, what, where, when, why) questions. Throughout all areas of instruction, I will be modeling, prompting, and encouraging his motivation. I will also be maintaining the use of the classroom reward system that is in place. I will be providing him with praise and tangible rewards if he engages in appropriate behaviors such as turning in his homework or setting a good example for his peers.]

Now Prompt 1.b. is asking for what could be a good amount of detail, specifically with regard to any district, school, classroom, or teacher preparation program requirements that need to be incorporated into your lesson planning and teaching. While most candidates are apt to provide the detail regarding the setting they are in, they often fail to include what their special education teacher preparation program has trained them to incorporate into their teaching. See the response to this prompt as constructed by Jill:

[The classroom includes mixed grade and academic levels. Due to each one of the students' unique needs, the students are following various daily schedules. Two fourth grade students attend mainstream general education classes for all academic subjects. Two students attend general education classes for reading, math and science. The rest of the students remain in the self-contained classroom for the majority of the day. While in the classroom they work on academics in small-leveled groups or individually. The fourth grade students are broken up into two groups, one group of two and one group of three, based on their academic needs. The fifth grade students are also divided into groups, one consists of one student and the other includes two. The schedule is changing throughout the day based on which students are pulled out for their related services including speech language pathology, or occupational therapy. All of the students receive these related services throughout the week. The teacher and the teacher's assistant each run

different groups based upon who is in the room at that time and which academic task needs to be covered. Each student has a maximum of two hours a day in their groups for English language arts and math to be covered each day. Outside of their groups individual work is done with students as well for these subjects. Due to these circumstances the opportunity for full group instruction is limited. For those reasons, and considering the class size of eleven students, my instructional delivery will be individualized.

In addition to the varying schedule, small group and individual work, my teacher preparation program will also influence my instructional delivery. My university influences my teaching methods through the use of Universal Design for Learning. This is a set of principles used to design instruction so that all students are provided with an equal opportunity to learn. I will be applying these guidelines in my teaching and providing my focus learner with multiple forms of engagement, representation, and action/expression. Due to my university's UDL emphasis I will also be using technology to support my learning segment in order to provide the learner with multiple means of representation. All of these factors will specifically impact the instruction I provide for the focus learner. I will be working individually with him and in his small group. The exact time of instruction will also change each day based on when he leaves the classroom for speech or school specials.]

The next bullets in Prompt 1 ask you to explain your role in your focus learner's instructional program. This should be answered in a very straightforward manner. See the response to this prompt by Jill:

[My role in the focus learner's instructional program will be to teach English Language Arts and Math, to him individually, as well as to his fourth grade learning group composed of one other student. I will be part of an instructional team made up of his classroom's lead teacher, teacher's assistant, and his speech language pathologist. This student does not have a one-to-one paraprofessional. Throughout my instruction I will be addressing his IEP goals and learning style. The focus learner is a multisensory learner. Due to this I will be presenting information in a combination of visual, auditory, and tactile strategies. I will be working with the focus learner on his IEP goals in the areas of reading, writing, math, and speaking and listening skills. Reading instruction will consist of developing skills for decoding and comprehension. Writing instruction will focus on generating ideas, organization of a paragraph, and ways to increase word-finding skills, as well as working on his IEP goal of writing a paragraph. During math the focus learner and I will be working on the use of manipulatives to increase his understanding of addition, subtraction, and multiplication. In addition to these academic goals we will also work on communication goals of building his academic vocabulary in all subjects, and responding appropriately to WH (who, what, where, when, why) questions. Throughout all areas of instruction I will be modeling, prompting, and encouraging his motivation.

I will also be maintaining the use of the classroom reward system that is in place. I will be providing him with praise and tangible rewards if he engages in appropriate behaviors such as turning in his homework or setting a good example for his peers.]

Now the last bullet for Prompt 1.a. is asking you to state the instructional time you plan to have with the focus learner. The example provided gives you the impression that you can provide a simple and straightforward answer. I advise against that. This is another prompt where you can elaborate a little bit and add justification for your decision to work with the focus learner in a one-to-one setting. See how Jill responds to this prompt:

[Instructional time with the focus learner for the learning goal will take place daily, in thirty-minute increments. I will be working with him independently. The focus learner and I will independently work through writing goals such as generating ideas, discuss the elements of a paragraph, and review academic vocabulary that goes along with these elements such as transition words, topic sentences, supporting details, main ideas, narrative, and conclusion sentences. We will use graphic organizers and various strategies to create paragraphs, and work together on creative journaling.]

Prompt 1.c. can be answered with a straightforward response if this is warranted. Here you are asked to describe any textbook or instructional program that is being used in conjunction with your learning segment. Answer it with specificity and include what is relevant.

Moving on to prompt 1.d., your response to this prompt is dependent on whether your focus learner is being taught in a group or individually in a 1:1 setting. If possible, I highly advocate that you work with a student who can be taught one on one. Doing so lessens the variables that must be considered when constructing and teaching your learning segment. Instruction in a one-to-one setting is possible only if the focus learner needs such a setting to effectively participate in the learning segment and achieve the learning goal. Note, you will need to justify this again in the Planning Commentary so make sure you are consistent with your justification.

The second page of the Context for Learning is all about the focus learner. Prompts 1-4 are straightforward in nature and simply require you to note the child's age, gender, grade level, and primary language of instruction. Prompts 5, 6, and 7 require more detailed responses, including information gathered from the focus learner's IEP. Prompt 5 is asking you to describe the focus learner's disability as reported on their IEP. It is important to be specific regarding this information and to report it as written on the IEP. I urge my candidates to delve into the IEP and include in their response the official disability classification as well as any disability and

medical diagnosis that are reported in the document. When appropriate, quote the IEP itself.

Prompts 6 and 7 may or may not require a simple response, depending on whether the focus learner uses any form of augmentative communication and if they have a behavior management plan afforded to them. If the learner uses some form of communication system, provide the device specifics as well as when and how it is used by the learner. When it comes to a behavior management plan, a formal plan will be noted in the IEP. If one exists, describe it as noted in the IEP. Even if the learner does not have a formal plan, the classroom might have some form of behavior support in place for your focus learner or even the entire class. If this is the case, provide details regarding this support program and note how it may influence your work during the learning segment.

Once you have responded to the prompts as I have recommended, you should have a highly illustrated description of the Context for Learning that your instruction is set in. The emphasis here is to leave no question unanswered and ensure no questions arise in the mind of the scorer. You want the scorer of your portfolio to be crystal clear when it comes to your responses, so they can judge your work as if they had personally visited the classroom you are working in and come to know the focus learner as well as you do.

Now that you have completed your Context for Learning, you now need to plan your learning segment and the instruction that goes with it. The first thing I recommend you do is create your lesson plans. Let's discuss this below.

Lesson Plans

edTPA requires that you create and implement a three to five lesson sequence for your focus learner. In my experience, there is almost no reason to create more than the minimum of three lessons. Why create more work for yourself than is necessary? What is necessary is that your lesson plans are coherent and sequential in nature; aligned with the focus learner's IEP goals and the applicable standards the goal work is based on; and connected to what the focus learner has already been learning prior to your lesson plans and what he/she will continue to learn after you have completed your work with them for your edTPA portfolio. See the lesson plan template I assign to my students for use in their portfolio in Appendix A. If your teacher preparation program has not already provided you with a lesson plan template, please use this one for your portfolio. I also recommend making sure that your program's template incorporates the same lesson plan

components as my template. Finally, edTPA stipulates that each lesson plan should be no longer than four pages in length. Considering the fact that the lesson plan template itself, including the prompts, occupies a good portion of the template, you are not actually writing four pages of content for each lesson.

As you can see from a review of Jill's lesson plans seen in Appendix A (which are the templates used by all of my candidates), the first thing you need to note is the "Learning Segment". What is this? As I tell my students, before you read any of the edTPA documents, READ the Glossary located towards the back of the handbook. To paraphrase the definition of a learning segment, it is the three to five lesson sequence that you are planning to implement for your portfolio. It is critical that you create a learning segment where the 3-4 lessons are aligned with one another. In other words, the lessons in the series must have a connection to one another that is logical and sequential in nature. Remember, the learning segment is only three to five lessons that in many cases will be implemented over the course of just one week. In all likelihood, each lesson will only take a maximum of 45 minutes to complete, much less with a young focus learner or one with significant learning challenges. As such, what you can accomplish in one lesson will be limited, leading to the need to address the goal and objectives of the learning segment over the course of several lessons.

While you are determining what the learning segment will be, you also need to decide what the goal will be for the series of three to five lessons that make up the learning segment. As you can see on the lesson plan template, this is called the edTPA Learning Goal. This is the goal you want the focus learner to achieve by the end of the learning segment. As I have stated before, I highly recommend creating a learning segment of only three lessons. This being the case, you need to determine an edTPA Learning Goal that can be reasonably accomplished by the focus learner in three lessons. Added to this is the need to identify an IEP goal of the focus learner that aligns with your chosen learning goal. This seems logical, but not ensuring alignment will certainly lead to a lesson sequence that contains fatal flaws that will lead to a low score in at least Rubric 1, if not several others as well.

As you decide what the Learning Goal will be and which of the focus learner's IEP goals it is applicable with and aligned to, you then need to determine the focus learner's base line data pertinent to the learning goal as it aligns with the applicable IEP. The base line data needs to be as specific as possible to the learning goal. Particularly, the base line data must illustrate, in measurable terms, what the focus learner knows with regard to what you want to teach him or her. This need for measurability runs

throughout the planning, teaching, and assessing process of your portfolio. In addition, the baseline data must also be current and acquired through whatever means of assessment is most conducive to determining the focus learner's prior knowledge pertinent to the learning goal. In general, you should not rely upon data that have been gathered from the focus learner's annual review process since the assessments that produced these data were typically conducted several months before you are developing your portfolio. Finally, your baseline data should be gathered by you. Doing so leads to a higher level of veracity that the data are current, accurate, and aligned with what you are planning to teach the focus learner during the learning segment.

The next thing you need to determine for the lesson plan is the content standards that are applicable and aligned with your portfolio's learning goal and the cited IEP goal of the focus learner. While these content standards are typically the state standards that have already been identified in the focus learner's IEP, you are not bound to use these standards. You can instead use learning standards published by various organizations that pertain to the content you are teaching in your learning segment. In addition, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) publishes learning standards for teaching students with disabilities as does its divisions, such as the Division of Early Childhood (DEC).

The fifth item to be included in the lesson plan is the actual objective that the focus learner will hopefully accomplish in this lesson. Remember, this is the first of three to five lessons you are constructing for your learning segment. As such, you need to plan out how you will move the focus learner to achieve the edTPA learning goal over the course of the learning segment's lesson plans. Will you increase the level of proficiency the focus learner is expected to achieve as they progress through the series of lessons you have designed, or will you lessen the level of support you provide to the focus learner while expecting that the student will continue to maintain satisfactory progress as you proceed through the three to five lessons?

It is these supports that constitute the next section of the lesson plan. Here you need to provide in detail the specific planned supports, lesson modifications, and accommodations that you will employ to assist the focus learner in achieving the established lesson objective. What these supports are, depends on the nature and needs of the focus learner. They can be as simple as verbal prompting to the use of a communication device or some other form of assistive technology.

As you determine the above aspects of your learning segment and the lesson plans, look at the official edTPA template for your portfolio's Planning Commentary. In it you will see the need to restate the information

I am describing here. Specifically, Prompt 1 of the Planning Commentary requires you to state the learning goal, the focus learner's applicable IEP goal along with the content standards that align with the above. Further on, you then need to state the objectives for each of the three to five lessons. To reiterate, make sure to establish specific and measurable objectives for each of these lessons that then lead to accomplishing the learning goal by the end of the learning segment.

This need to restate content, whether it be restating information contained in the lesson plans or from one prompt response to another, is a common occurrence when it comes to writing your portfolio. This need to reiterate what you may have already stated, but possibly in a somewhat different manner, is not to annoy you or create additional work for you but it is edTPA's way of ensuring that you know what you know when it comes to good teaching.

Getting back to the lesson plan, item #6 requires you to state the communication skill that the focus learner needs to use in order to accomplish the learning goal. This communication skill can be as basic as acknowledging verbal or visual requests or to whatever level of communication skill the candidate is capable of performing. When you sign up for edTPA, they will provide you with "Academic Language Handout: Special Education Communication Skills" that provides very specific guidance on the types of communication skills that you can incorporate into your portfolio planning, instruction, and assessment. As this handout states, for the Planning Commentary you need to "identify one expressive or receptive communication skill that the focus learner will use in order to participate in learning tasks or demonstrate learning related to the learning goal" (p. 1). As I have already stated, you simply need to identify which communication skill the focus learner will need to utilize when working on the learning goal for your portfolio. Keep in mind that you will also need to implement this skill in your instruction of the focus learner and evaluate their use of this communication skill as part of the assessment process in Task 3. More about this in subsequent chapters.

Once you have determined which communication skill you will be working on with the focus learner, you next need to describe in item #7 the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) that you will be implementing to facilitate your teaching and the focus learner's accomplishment of the lesson objectives and the edTPA learning goal. As per CAST (2018);

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is based on neuroscience research which has identified three primary neurological networks that impact learning:

- The recognition network deals with incoming stimuli and affects "what" students learn,
- The strategic network mediates "how" students process incoming information based on past experience or background knowledge, and
- The affective network regulates students' attitudes and feelings about incoming information as well as their motivation to engage in specific activities – the "why" students want to learn and engage.

Successful teaching and learning involve all three networks simultaneously.

Based on the three neurological networks, UDL's three principles are:

Multiple means of representation – give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge.

Multiple means of expression – provide learners with alternatives for demonstrating what they know.

Multiple means of engagement – tap into learners' interests, offer appropriate challenges, and increase motivation.

It is very important that you provide details of your lesson's UDL principles and strategies. Doing so will illustrate to the edTPA scorer your intimate knowledge of the focus learner's needs and attributes.

After describing the UDL strategies and interventions you will use, the next item (#8) asks you to explain how you are creating a culturally responsive lesson. What does this mean? Let's look at Prompt 2 in the Planning Commentary. Here the prompt asks you to delineate what you know about the focus learner's assets that you can incorporate into lesson planning and instruction. The relevance of acknowledging this information rests on your ability to tap into what motivates the focus learner. It is important here to review the edTPA Glossary and the definition of this concept.

As noted in the Glossary of the edTPA Special Education Handbook (SCALE, 2018), these assets are referred to as your "knowledge of learners" (p. 53). These assets include those that are personal to the child, culturally relevant to them, and/or based in their community. These can include the focus learner's skills, abilities, and interests, and those aspects of their culture and community that are relevant to the focus learner and to the planned learning segment. It is important for you to unpack your thinking when it comes to discerning and describing the focus learner's assets. Think about everything the child is able to relate to. One of my edTPA candidates was able to build her learning segment around the focus learner's avid interest in soccer and construct three lessons that connected his love of

soccer with written comprehension. You will hear more about this in one of the case studies I detail in subsequent chapters.

The construction of your lesson plans continues with item #9 and the lesson procedures you will follow. Here you need to detail the lesson materials you will use (item a) along with the planned artifacts of the focus learner's work (item b), the "Motivation/Introduction to the Lesson" (item c). In addition, you need to describe the Instructional/Developmental Activity of the lesson (item d) and finally for item e, describe the guided and independent practice activity that the focus learner will engage in as a result of the lessons. This section of your lesson plans will provide the scorer with an up-close look at how the lesson will look when they watch the video clip(s) you submit for Task 2 and possibly Task 3. In addition, you are allowed to upload a maximum of five pages of key instructional materials per each lesson plan in Task 1, Part C. Assuming you keep to my recommendation of creating a portfolio of three lessons, you are then able to upload 15 pages of key instructional materials. These materials can include a variety of artifacts such as a copy of a book cover or a page or two of a PowerPoint presentation, copies of written materials or photos of manipulatives you are using in the lessons. Remember, these are "key" instructional materials so be mindful of what is most important for you to share with the scorer. Finally, review page 46 of the handbook for the specifications regarding what file types are allowed when uploading your instructional materials.

Once you have determined what your instructional materials will be, the next components of your lesson plans (items 10 and 11) are the assessment(s) and progress monitoring that you plan to use for determining how much has been learned over the course of your learning segment. How you go about assessing your focus learner's performance needs to be tied directly to what you expect to be accomplished over the course of the three lessons. Your assessment can be formative or summative in nature. I recommend that you engage in assessment in each lesson. Good practice would dictate that you conduct a formative assessment at the end of lesson one and again at the conclusion of lesson two. This then sets you up to conclude your learning segment with a formative assessment. Having three sets of data gives you options when it comes to your analysis of the focus learner's performance, providing you with the ability to choose the data that best illustrate the learning that took place over the course of your three lessons.

The final component of the lesson plan template (item #12) is the "Reflection". As noted on the template, the content of this item is eventually taken out of the lesson plan itself and incorporated into your Planning Commentary. I have my student teachers complete this component after

they have conducted the lesson. Doing so requires you to complete this reflection “in the moment” rather than waiting until sometime later that week and having a resulting lapse in memory of the details of the lesson itself. As you can see when comparing the lesson plan template and the prompts in the Planning Commentary, what I ask you to complete in the lesson plan is exactly what you need to write in response to the prompts for the Task 1 commentary so the work that you do for item 12 is in support of the work you need to complete for the commentary itself.

For Jill, her lesson plans provided the scorer with all of the information described above. Her three lesson plans are included with this book as Appendix A.

Beyond the Lesson Plans – Your Planning Commentary

OK, you have written your Context for Learning, created your lesson plans, identified your materials and supplies, and decided on how you will assess the focus learner’s progress. Great! Now you need to tackle the first of three commentaries that constitute the large majority of the written work that makes up your portfolio. If you haven’t just recently read your edTPA handbook, please go back to it and review pages 10 to 17. Once you have done so, come back to this point in the book for our discussion on how to address the prompts in the Planning Commentary (PC).

Prompt 1 in the PC is all about alignment. Alignment of the learning goal, applicable standards, the lesson objectives, and the planned supports that comprise the learning segment. This need for a high level of alignment among all of these components is critical to your overall portfolio but particularly for your score on Rubric 1. Take a look at this rubric on page 18 of your handbook as well as the scoring decisions for this rubric in the Understanding Rubric Level Progression resource and you will see the level of importance that is attached to this prompt. For example, for you to get a level 3.0 score on Rubric 1, you need to show that all of the components I just mentioned are “consistently aligned” with each other and that “all lesson objectives include clearly defined measurable objectives for the focus learner’s performance”. Not ensuring that your goals, objectives, standards, and supports are aligned will result in a score of 2.0 or lower. This is not how you want to begin your portfolio scoring.

In addition to detailing your goals, objectives, and standards, you need to describe the supports you will employ to facilitate the focus learner’s achievement of the lesson objectives and learning goal. All of this information gets entered into the grid located on the Planning Commentary template under the first prompt. When deciding on the supports you will