

2018

## Toward a More Loving Assessment Practice

Ellen Ballock  
*Gordon College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/icctej>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ballock, E. (2018). Toward a More Loving Assessment Practice. *International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/>-

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolfe@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolfe@georgefox.edu).

---

## Toward a More Loving Assessment Practice

### Abstract

One distinguishing mark of the Christ-follower is meant to be love - for God and for neighbor. What does this mean in the context of our everyday work as teachers or teacher educators? This paper specifically explores the relevance of loving heart attitudes for assessing student work. This paper first provides a conceptual foundation to justify taking up a lens of love while looking at student work and then reports on findings from a self-study of my own assessment practice. This paper highlights the importance of moment by moment disciplined choice to look away from self and self-interest towards the good of others.

## Toward a More Loving Assessment Practice

Ellen Ballock, Gordon College

### Abstract

One distinguishing mark of the Christ-follower is meant to be love—for God and for neighbor. What does this mean in the context of our everyday work as teachers or teacher educators? This paper specifically explores the relevance of loving heart attitudes for assessing student work. This paper first provides a conceptual foundation to justify taking up a lens of love while looking at student work and then reports on findings from a self-study of my own assessment practice. This paper highlights the importance of moment by moment disciplined choice to look away from self and self-interest towards the good of others.

### Introduction

I felt proud of the assignment when I handed it out and explained it to my students. Proud because the assignment was rigorous, yet clearly structured. Proud because the assignment would provide my students with targeted practice and feedback aligned with the upcoming end of program assessment. Proud because of the time and effort I had spent crafting a quality learning opportunity. Yet, here in the public library reading students' submissions, my eyes rolled, my fingers pounded out critical feedback on my laptop keyboard, and my condescending thoughts grumbled, "I can't believe how bad these are. Didn't they even try? Didn't they even look at the rubric? ... I can't read these right now. I need a break."

Discouraged, I wandered the library stacks in search of an inspiring read. Flipping aimlessly through a devotional, words popped off the page: "And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic all-purpose garment. Never be without it" (Colossians 3:12-14, The Message Version). I backed up to the beginning of the quoted passage. "Chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even tempered, content with second place, quick to

forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you" (Colossians 3:12-13, The Message Version). The words cut deep, and I journaled a prayer of response:

Father, what is the meaning of this passage for me as I sit here in the library reading papers—papers that represent the work of novices, papers which contain weaknesses I didn't expect?

Lord, clothe me with compassion, kindness, humility, and discipline that I may view my students as learners, that I may give feedback with kindness, that I may draw on their strengths, that I would not come across as punitive, but that I may respond fairly. May I be a learner—a student of my students—in this moment. (personal reflection)

There was something so powerful about this experience that it remains etched in my memory years later, still a subject of contemplation. Perhaps it was the emotion—the weight of conviction, the awe that such a clear word from the Lord would come in the midst of ordinary everyday work. Perhaps it was the dramatic change that followed—tension and frustration immediately displaced by an inquiring stance, allowing me to uncover the good in students' work and to systematically analyze students' struggles in order to provide fine-tuned instruction the next class period. Or perhaps it was the disequilibrium produced by sudden juxtaposition of concepts not typically paired in scholarly discourse—love and assessment.

Love and assessment. Loving students through assessment. Assessment as an act of love. Loving assessment practice. The pairing of these words feels awkward, unfamiliar, and surprising, no matter the phrasing. Yet Jacobs (2001) argued, "We need not shy away from evaluating any everyday pursuit according to... 'the law of love'" (p. 10). The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to probe more deeply into what it means to exercise love in the

context of assessment. To narrow the scope of the topic, this paper specifically focuses on what it means to exhibit love while reading and responding to student work (e.g., papers, projects, homework, in-class exercises, performances). In this paper, I draw on readings in theology and education, as well as a self-study of my own assessment practice, in order to present a justification for looking at student work through a lens of love, to identify barriers that inhibit a loving examination of student work, and to highlight structures which promote more generous, charitable, loving readings of student work.

## Literature Review

### The Challenge of Love

Love for God and others is held up as a distinguishing mark of the Christ-follower, a hallmark of the Christian life. Jonathan Edwards (2012) asserted, “The labor of love is the main business of the Christian life” (p. 56)—the true evidence of a saving faith; Jesus exhorted his disciples to love one another, stating, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35, New International Version); and John wrote, “Dear friends, let us love one another... Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (I John 4:7-8, New International Version). In fact, when asked which commandment in the law was the greatest, Jesus answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39, New International Version).

If love is so central to the Christian life, then why is it so challenging? N. T. Wright (2010) argued, “Love is a virtue. It is a language to be learned, a musical instrument to be practiced, a mountain to be climbed via some steep and tricky cliff paths” (p. 183). Christian love is not just a feeling of affection towards God and others. Rather, it humbly looks out beyond self and self-interest towards God and neighbor (Wright, 2010). It is a state of the will which seeks the good of others (Lewis, 1952), not as a means to an end (e.g., favor with God or with others), but as an end in and of itself (Wright, 2010). In short, Wright asserted that living a life of love is a whole new way of being human, one

which anticipates a renewed heaven and earth, one which requires our complete transformation. While “a seed of...love is implanted in [our] hearts in a work of regeneration” (Edwards, 2012, p. 298) when we come to a saving faith, it has “much to struggle with in the heart in this world” (Edwards, 2012, p. 299). Old ingrained heart habits must gradually be replaced by new heart habits (Wright, 2010) through the lifelong process of deep transformational heart change known as sanctification. This transformation is “a progressive work of both God and man” (Grudem, 2005, p. 99). The Holy Spirit works in us, renewing our minds, our wills, and our conscious choices so that we desire to change (Wright, 2010), so that we become more and more responsive to the desires and promptings of the Spirit, more and more Christ-like in our actions (Grudem, 2005). Thus, love is a fruit of the Spirit, evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian (Galatians 5:22).

At the same time the Christian is also empowered by the Holy Spirit to play an active role in sanctification, striving for holiness and obedience (Grudem, 2005), taking steps that “involve hard decisions and hard actions, choices that run counter to the expectations, aspirations, desires, and instincts with which every human being comes equipped” (Wright, 2010, p. 143). Thus, developing new habits of Christian love also requires human effort and disciplined choice in thousands of small everyday moments. For the teacher, these small everyday moments may include looking at student work.

### What’s Love Got to Do with It?

Wait—looking at student work? What relevance does this noble calling to love God and others have for such mundane everyday tasks as looking at student work? The doctrine of vocation provides one perspective on this question (Keller, 2012; Ryken, 2006; Schuurman, 2004). This doctrine, first articulated by Luther and later embraced by the Puritans, frames all of life as holy: all relational spheres to which God calls Christians, including work, are “divinely given avenues through which persons respond obediently to the call of God to serve their neighbor in love” (Schuurman, 2004, p. 4). Framed this way, looking at student work is not simply a teacher’s duty, sometimes pleasant and

other times a drudgery. Rather, it is an opportunity to serve students in love.

Educational research provides a second perspective to support the proposition that looking at student work can be a concrete, practical way to serve students in love. Literature on formative assessment is particularly useful in supporting this argument (e.g., Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004; Popham, 2008; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006). Assessment is considered formative when it provides information to teachers and students that help them to adjust teaching and learning activities (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Popham, 2008). Formative assessment is learning focused rather than grading focused. Many types of assessments can be used for formative purposes, including observations, class discussions, every pupil response strategies (e.g., clickers, whiteboard responses, thumbs up/down), and both formal and informal written assignments: the everyday work students do for courses (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Popham, 2008). Reviews of research have concluded that formative assessment is among the most powerful practices teachers can implement in order to positively impact student learning, particularly for the lowest achievers (Black & William, 1998; Hattie, 2012). When teachers look at student work in order to monitor students' understanding of content and offer feedback to support continued growth, when they look at student work because they want to make adjustments to their own teaching practice to better support student learning (e.g., instructional decisions for the next class period, revisions to course syllabi, instructional units, or assignments), when they look at student work to evaluate and improve educational programs, they are engaging in a task with an inherently loving purpose. They are identifying students' current status with respect to learning goals, identifying gaps, and thinking about how to close those gaps (Stiggins et al., 2006). They are seeking to promote the good of their students, their students' learning, growth, and development. They are participating in God's creative work in shaping and forming his children (Schuurman, 2004), cultivating human potential (Keller, 2012).

If the very reason a teacher formatively assesses student work is to promote students' good, then why should it be difficult to exercise love during this task? Why should it require effort and disciplined choice? It turns out that there are different approaches a teacher might take when looking at students' work; and charitable (Jacobs, 2001), generous (Spence, 2010, 2014), loving approaches to looking at student work run counter to two natural impulses. First, the literature highlights teachers' inclination to approach student work through a lens of negative evaluation (Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 1999; Spence, 2010, 2014; Whitney, Olcese, & Squier, 2015). Through this lens teachers often make snap judgments about students based on untested assumptions about students' effort, character, cultural background, values, or learning processes. The result is a deficit view of students. In contrast, a loving approach assumes goodwill. To assume goodwill, a teacher must approach the student work respectfully, choosing to believe that the student put purposeful thinking and effort into the assignment. This means approaching student work as "legitimate text, with the assumption that it does make sense [and] carries its own internal logic" (Donahue in Spence, 2010, p. 634). This means "avoiding quick dismissal and cheap disdain...and [instead] seeking the good in a text, choosing its truths over its defects" (Jacobs in Smith, 2011, p. 45). It means looking with an "eye of possibility" rather than an "eye of error" (Bomer, 2010, p. 50). Assuming goodwill does not mean lowering standards, glossing over errors, or offering unmerited praise. Rather, it means ferreting out the seeds of promise upon which the teaching-learning process can build.

Second, the literature suggests that teachers have a tendency to look at student work very quickly. As a result, they attend primarily to superficial features of the work (e.g., mechanics, following directions, surface aspects of content) rather than probing for deeper meaning (Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 1999, Spence, 2010, 2014; Whitney, Olcese, & Squire, 2015). In contrast, a loving approach looks attentively. Ball and Forzani (2009) claimed that probing students' ideas to identify key understandings and misunderstandings "requires closer attention to others than most individuals routinely accord to colleagues, friends, or even

family members” (p. 499). To look attentively enough to truly get to know students—their mastery of specific class goals, as well as their interests, strengths, and struggles more generally—a teacher must fight against the hurried busy pace of Western and institutional culture and slow down. She must linger intently, carefully, reflectively—delaying judgment in order to take in the details, ask questions, consider what the student is trying to communicate, think through multiple interpretations, and weigh the evidence (Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 1999; Jacobs in Smith, 2011; Kittle in Whitney, Olcese, & Squier, 2015). Thus, in order to lovingly assess student work, teachers must develop new habits of heart, mind, and action.

### Out with the Old, In with the New

To help teachers build new habits for learning from student work, a number of scholar-practitioners have designed structured protocols for small groups of teachers to use to collaboratively examine student work. The intent is for a group of teachers to practice looking attentively by spending 30-45 minutes collaboratively discussing a single student work sample. Collaboration allows for the sharing of multiple perspectives that help individuals move beyond the limitations of their own biases. Using the protocols to structure the collaboration helps build a new culture among the group, so that there is shared accountability for looking attentively and assuming goodwill. In this section, I briefly describe two of these protocols: The Collaborative Assessment Conference and Generous Reading (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Protocols for Looking at Student Work

Seidel’s Collaborative Assessment Conference	Spence’s Generous Reading
1. Examine the work	1. What are the voices in this piece?
2. Describe the work	2. What do they tell you about the student as a person?
3. Pose questions about the work (the student, the assignment, the context)	3. What do they tell you about the student as an author and the student’s process?
4. Speculate as to what the child was working on	
5. Hear from the presenting teacher	

6. Discuss implications for teaching and learning	4. What do they reveal about the student work?
---	--

The Collaborative Assessment Conference (Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 1999) is one structured protocol that promotes a loving look at student work. Steve Seidel and colleagues at Harvard University designed this protocol as a training tool to help small groups of teachers look more attentively at student work. During the first three steps in the protocol, participants must suspend judgment, postponing evaluative talk in order to closely examine the student work, share detailed descriptions of the work, and pose a variety of questions about the work. The protocol also supports teachers in assuming goodwill. The fourth step asks teachers to take an appreciative stance towards the student work by trying on the student’s perspective—speculating about the issues the student focused on, what the student seems to care about, what personal and academic strengths the student drew on while creating the work. Only after 20-30 minutes of describing and interpreting what is there in the student work do teachers discuss implications for teaching and learning for this student and students more generally.

While the Collaborative Assessment Conference promotes a fairly open-ended look at student work, Generous Reading (Spence, 2010, 2014) steers teachers towards a very specific focus as they look at student work: students’ use of language. Undergirding this protocol is the assumption that oral and written language are socially constructed and therefore contain seeds from many sources. Teachers typically value the academic vocabulary and structures of their content area. However, as students seek to make meaning of new content, they are just as likely to borrow language that echoes the structures, values, and ideologies of popular culture and the media, their peers, and their family, community, and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, Spence encouraged teachers to look attentively in order to identify the voices students draw on in crafting their written work in order to better understand students, their learning processes, and their connections to larger discourse communities. Though not explicit in the protocol itself, Spence also encouraged teachers to assume goodwill by

recognizing that students' use of disciplinary language is likely to appear clunky or clumsy as they first grapple with ideas. She emphasized that students will gradually appropriate the language of the broader disciplinary community through reading texts, participating in classroom discussions, and working on assignments. Only as students internalize the voices of the larger discourse will they be able to further develop their ideas and communicate those ideas orally and in writing.

Both Generous Reading and the Collaborative Assessment Conference show promise for interrupting teachers' natural impulses (looking superficially and evaluating negatively) and building new habits (looking attentively and assuming goodwill). However, it is not feasible for teachers to spend 30-45 minutes collaboratively examining every piece of student work. Therefore, it is crucial to also investigate the nature of the effort and disciplined choice required for loving assessment practice in the midst of the everyday work of teaching. In order to more deeply examine the inherent challenges in developing loving habits of heart, mind, and action for looking at student work, as well as the possibilities they might afford, I decided to study my own assessment practice.

### **Self-Study Design**

There is a strong tradition of self-study within the field of teacher education, supported by an active professional network—the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices SIG of the American Educational Research Association—and an internationally peer-reviewed journal—*Studying Teacher Education*. The self-study methodology is self-initiated, self-focused, and improvement-oriented, yet it is also concerned with contributing to public knowledge that can lead to improvements in teacher education more broadly (LaBoskey, 2004). Given that the motivating factors driving this research were the felt tensions in my own assessment practice, my desire to grow in living out authentic love, and my desire to spur on further professional conversations around a loving assessment practice, self-study seemed the natural choice.

This self-study took place during one semester as I taught 16 students in one section of an education course entitled Human Development and Learning.

Written reflections on my own assessment practice served as the primary data source for this research. These reflections included accounts of the concrete details of my experiences as well as my attempts to make sense of these experiences through probing more deeply into emotions, thoughts, and perspectives. While writing these reflections I was constantly aware of the need for self-reflexivity (Patton, 2002), and thus sought to attend carefully to internal and external factors shaping my interpretation of my experiences and influencing what I recorded in my reflections. For example, I was painfully aware of the inclination to write for an audience, to highlight what was working in my assessment practice and to avoid the vulnerability of including honest struggle and failings. I intentionally fought against this temptation by making efforts to include thick descriptions, and by intentionally probing struggles from multiple angles on multiple dates. Additionally, I was continually aware that engaging in this research shaped how I interacted with students and with student work. Specifically, the practice of writing regular reflections kept me focused on planning for a variety of informal formative assessments in the course and heightened my awareness of the attitudes through which I approached assessment tasks, challenging me to work through tensions in pursuit of loving thought and action.

In total, written reflections included 13 single-spaced typed pages, written on 15 different dates, about 18 different assessment experiences. From these written reflections, I identified two critical incidents for in-depth analysis. The first critical incident involved looking at a class set of informal exit tickets, a non-graded quick write I asked students submit at the end of one class period so that I could check in on their understanding of the content focus that day (i.e., the role culture plays child development). The second critical incident involved looking at two formal papers in which students needed to use course content to analyze a current event and a personal learning experience.

The identification of critical incidents is a form of purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). Focusing on these two critical incidents was a logical choice for several reasons. First, these incidents specifically involved student work, whereas some reflections

focused on other aspects of assessment, such as in-class questioning and students' self-assessments. Second, tensions I experienced during these incidents were weighty enough that I reflected on each of them in multiple entries on multiple dates. Finally, each critical incident recounted a full story line: initial tension or struggle reading the student work followed by considerable efforts to work through the tension and culminating in a reframing of the task which brought resolution (i.e., a more loving approach to the students' work).

To organize data for analysis, I created a case record for each critical incident (Patton, 2002). I first copied and pasted reflections pertaining to a critical incident into one case document, organizing the reflections chronologically as incidents unfolded, editing to eliminate redundancies. Then I wrote a case narrative, generating thick description (Patton, 2002) by adding data from supplementary data sources. These included assessment prompts and directions, excerpts from student work samples, my handwritten or typed feedback to students, and class plans and materials.

Next, I looked within and across cases to identify patterns or themes. To do this, I used a combination of deductive and inductive approaches to coding the data (Patton, 2002). The coding process was deductive in that it was guided by the purposes of this research: I specifically sought to identify barriers inhibiting loving assessment of student work, structures supporting a loving reading of student work, and outcomes resulting from a loving reading of student work. The coding process was inductive in that the specific codes applied to the data with respect to these three purposes emerged from the data itself through a process of open coding. Four key themes provide useful insight into what it means to look lovingly at student work.

## **Themes**

### **Theme 1: Unmet Expectations**

Like the opening vignette in the introduction of this paper, each of the two critical incidents in this study began with disappointment: many students' exit ticket responses and current events assignments fell short of the high hopes I had for students' work. In the exit ticket case my high hopes were rooted in my own fascination with the topic: the role culture

plays in shaping our development as people. I hoped students would "express the awe and wonder I felt about the content" (personal reflection). With the formal papers, my high hopes were grounded in the hard work I had undertaken to develop supports to foster student success: refining a focused lecture on relevant concepts, creating similar analysis tasks for students to complete collaboratively in class, drafting and annotating a sample paper to post on the course Blackboard site, and making time for peer review of first drafts. I hoped that increased support would lead to improved performance outcomes.

Disappointment led to irritation and a general sense of angst which colored my reading of students' work with an "increasingly critical and dis-satisfied eye" (personal reflection). In my reflections I probed these emotions, seeking to identify underlying causes. It quickly became clear that one source of my irritation was an underlying expectation that reading students' work should be enjoyable, even intellectually stimulating:

What do I expect? Sophistication. Analysis. Something interesting to read. Insight. Something that spurs academic dialogue...I want to see brilliance...Am I more focused on myself and my own reading experience than on my students and their learning? Am I willing to love them even when they don't provide for me a pleasant and insightful reading experience? (personal reflection)

I also realized that I had harbored an underlying hope that students' written work would provide a source of affirmation for me to help me push aside insecurities and feel good about my work as a teacher: I was so hopeful. I wanted to see brilliance. Perhaps as evidence of my own brilliant teaching of the subject matter, perhaps as evidence that the students were taking me and the course seriously (personal reflection).

Finally, I was frustrated because I felt uncomfortable due to my own uncertainty about how to respond to students' work. With respect to the exit tickets, I typed:

I had looked forward to using these exit tickets as a way to practice loving assessment. I



had thought I would write back to students, give thoughtful responses, and in this way interact and engage with them. But after writing a few comments on one, I just couldn't think of anything worth writing back on the others. (personal reflection)

Similarly, with respect to the current events papers, I wrote:

Lucy Spence (2014) describes responding to student writing as dialogic. I think that's why I enjoy responding to fairly well written papers...It feels like a conversation. Perhaps my problem with a poorly written paper is not the poorly written paper in and of itself, but the fact that I don't know how to enter the dialogue. I can't find a jumping off point. (personal reflection)

### **Theme 2: "They" Thinking**

Given that my disappointment and resulting irritation were so focused on myself—my interest in content, my hard work, my enjoyment, my insecurities and uncertainties—it may not be surprising that my first impulse was defensive. My thoughts switched into "they" mode. This mode of thinking is evident in the opening vignette: "Didn't they even try? Didn't they even look at the rubric?" It also appears in both critical incidents: "My immediate conclusion is that they are not taking this class seriously," "Can't they just read the directions or follow the model provided," "Don't they care?" Embedded in this thought pattern is an attitude of superiority that lumps students together into one incompetent group rather than acknowledging the unique strengths or weaknesses of individuals. "Didn't they even look at the rubric?" (because certainly I would have). "Can't they just read the directions and follow the model?" (because any reasonably thinking person could). Furthermore, "they" thinking makes ungrounded snap judgments about students, projecting my own explanations onto students' work rather than seeking students' explanations or perspectives on the work (Labberton, 2010). "They are not taking this class seriously" (because clearly there could be no other explanation for why they would turn in this type of work).

### **Theme 3: Alternate Interpretive Principles**

Little and Horn (2007) noted the importance of the interpretive principles teachers use as they seek to make sense of and draw meaning from their classroom experiences. The "they" thinking noted above is rooted in interpretive principles focused on students' deficits: These students don't care. They aren't putting forth sufficient effort. They are incompetent or inferior. During each critical incident, these deficit-based interpretive principles were challenged by alternate interpretive principles arising from several sources.

Reflection on my teaching practice served as one challenge to these initial interpretive principles. After spending an hour or so wallowing in discouragement over the content of students' exit tickets, I "gave myself a brief pep talk" (personal reflection) and decided to both reflect on what had gone on during the class session and to push myself to more clearly articulate what I had hoped students would write in response to the exit ticket prompt (i.e., What big idea are you walking away with today about culture and how it shapes development?). I realized "an explicit set of big ideas were not even clear in my own mind" (personal reflection). While students had seemed interested and engaged in class activities and discussions of assigned readings, my reliance on my gut rather than on clearly articulated big ideas meant I had provided limited guidance to help students distinguish between interesting details and the broad organizing concepts of the discipline. A new interpretive principle emerged: Students need help identifying the big ideas in content (and this depends upon my own disciplined articulation of big ideas).

Conversation with a student also challenged patterns of "they" thinking. I asked this particular student to meet with me because I wanted to give her the opportunity to redo her current events paper. I wanted to be certain she understood what she needed to revise. I also hoped that our conversation would help her approach the next assignment differently. During the conversation, I was struck by how eager she was to hear my suggestions and talk about strategies for improvement. Following this meeting I typed:

She expressed appreciation for the time I spent meeting with her, because she wanted to do better. She shared that she's feeling really uncertain with this material. This was such an important reminder for me. This foundations module is hard. Students are being immersed in a whole new field with a whole new language... I am reminded that these are people, that these learners are embarking on a new journey into new territory... Perhaps what seems like a lack of effort is really just the face of their uncertainties in the midst of something new. (personal reflection)

As a result of this conversation, another new set of interpretive principles emerged: developing disciplinary language and thinking is a challenge, and students feel uncertain in the process.

Rereading Spence's (2010) article on generous reading served as a final challenge to patterns of "they" thinking. Reminded of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, "specifically the idea that we all draw on the voices of those around us as we think and write," (personal reflection) and Spence's assertion "that teachers can better understand the content of their students' writing if they work to identify the various voices in the piece," (personal reflection) my thinking shifted. I reflected:

What if I read those exit tickets more generously? What if I begin with the assumption that even this five minutes of thinking and writing is worthy of taking seriously—that it represents my students' best efforts in the moment, that it will give me a window into their thinking and processing as learners? What if I look to see which voices they are drawing on in their writing, and how they are appropriating those voices? (personal reflection)

Again, these reflections highlight alternate interpretive principles: students' writing can provide insight into the sources of information influencing students' thinking. Therefore, these student work samples might help me better understand my students as learners.

#### **Theme Four: Changes**

By offering new lenses through which to consider student work, new interpretive principles opened up new possibilities for seeing and taking action. At the most basic level, new interpretive principles

affected my attitudes towards student work in the course, even student work falling short of my expectations. This is evident in my typed reflections on reading and responding to the personal learning experience papers, as I continued to draw on the interpretive principle that adopting disciplinary language and thinking is a challenge for students:

After reading only three assignments, ranging from mediocre to strong, I notice a difference. Reading these assignments is so different from reading the first assignment in the course... I can tell there was effort... Even in the assignment I read analyzing 5th-6th grade experiences through the lens of transductive reasoning—a characteristic of thought typical of early childhood—I can see student effort. There are attempts at using the language of the field (e.g., transductive reasoning and plasticity). It's inaccurate. There's no specific learning theory named. But I can see effort. (personal reflection)

Instead of reacting with frustration and irritation, instead of immediately switching into the defensive and judgmental "they" mode, I was able to see attempts at using disciplinary language and assume goodwill—to see the seeds of possibility in the work.

New interpretive principles also opened up new opportunities to experiment with teaching practice in order to better support students' learning. Realizing that students need help identifying the big ideas in content led me to adjust my instruction for the very next class period:

I crafted four key big idea statements to share with students at the start of the next class period:  
(1) Culture's influence is pervasive; (2) Culture is continuously changing/evolving; (3) The material and symbolic tools of the culture serve as resources for the developing child; (4) Culture is passed down through direct explicit instruction, imitation, and social enhancement. Then I had students work in partners to read these statements and elaborate on them. By doing this they were able to assess their own understanding. This helped to review/reinforce what they may already have been thinking or uncover areas where they were less clear. As

questions emerged, they were able to ask me, and we focused a brief discussion on those areas of uncertainty. I celebrated this as a success...I was able to adjust my teaching practice in a way that helped students gain a better understanding of content. (personal reflection)

While in this example I was able to make adjustments to teaching practice in order to support students' learning, a final example highlights how new interpretive principles can inform adjustments to practice in future iterations of a course. Reminded that students' writing draws on a variety of voices and that identifying these voices might help me better understand students as learners, I decided to reread the culture exit tickets more generously. Though I read quickly, I read more analytically, underlining key phrases and writing notes in the margins:

I found that despite inarticulate wording, there was meaning expressed in every single exit ticket. Students connected with larger central issues in the field we had looked at the previous class [nature/nurture; universality/diversity...One of the big ideas I articulated—culture is pervasive—was a common theme across many students' writing...Specific words and phrases pointed clearly to one of the assigned readings...Similarly, several students clearly drew on words I had written up on the whiteboard during our classroom discussion.... (personal reflection)

This closer, more attentive reading provided confirming evidence that students did actually approach the task seriously, despite their clumsy rendering of ideas. Even more importantly, I noticed a hole. None of the students used language or ideas from the second assigned reading. This led to another round of reflective thinking:

Did they read it? Did they understand it? Was it less compelling? ... The [first] reading is more personal and provides clear application to school settings, whereas the [second] is informational and distant. [In the second reading], they talk about the tools of the culture, which seems more sterile. Perhaps students need help connecting these two very different ways of approaching the topic of culture. Perhaps this is the most important take-away from this generous

reading— finding a new way to structure the homework assignment or in-class activities so that students can think more deeply about these connections. (personal reflection)

## Discussion

Themes from the critical incidents presented in this paper suggest that the struggle to love students within the context of assessment practice is essentially a more specific case of the broader struggle to live a life of Christian love: the struggle look away from self and self-interest in order to focus on the interests of others through moment by moment disciplined choice. Evidence from the critical incidents presented in this paper clearly illustrates that the inclination to focus on self is a barrier to loving assessment practice. Despite the fact that the purpose of looking at student work is to support students' learning and development, students were barely even mentioned in my initial reflections as I wrestled with the self-interest, pride, and insecurity fueling my emotional responses to the work.

More importantly, this study suggests that the various interpretive principles that might be employed while looking at students' work are central to the moment by moment disciplined choice to think and act in love. This study offers a warning to be on guard against interpretive principles rooted in "they" thinking. "They" mode fuels a sense of pride and superiority and draws "a boundary, a perimeter, a distinction, a separation, a distance" (Labberton, 2010, p. 50) that characterizes students as incompetent, inferior, distant others. "They" thinking blames students for their own struggles with content. In contrast, by assuming goodwill, alternate interpretive principles (e.g., students are uncertain; developing disciplinary thinking is challenging; students' writing reveals a variety of sources of thought) produce empathy and compassion, thus drawing students closer. Instead of casting blame, alternate interpretive principles promote a sense of shared responsibility and an investigation into ways to improve teaching and learning. Thus, alternate interpretive principles are structures which support a more loving look at student work.

Finally, this study offers evidence that working towards a more generous or charitable approach to

looking at student work is not simply a matter of personal piety or virtue. Rather, loving heart attitudes open up opportunities for loving actions: making adjustments to practice that improve teaching and learning. Thus, loving assessment practice enhances teaching competence, which in turn better supports students' learning.

### **Implications for My Practice**

The first goal of a self-study is to inform one's own practice. One lesson I take from this study is that looking attentively at student work need not be particularly time-consuming if it is done purposefully. Ongoing refinement of my own articulation of essential understandings will allow me to read student assignments more purposefully with an eye towards what is most important.

Second, I am reminded how encouraging and empowering it is as a teacher to get a glimpse of learners' perspectives on the content or learners' experiences in the learning process. When I assume goodwill, when I remind myself that students are learners—still in process, when I prompt myself to expect imperfections, misconceptions, and undeveloped thoughts in their assignments, when I choose to engage in assessment as detective work to uncover students' current understandings, it takes the guess work out of my ongoing instructional decision-making (Popham, 2008). I can make decisions based on evidence of students' actual learning needs and interests rather than my assumptions about their learning needs and interests. Asking myself key questions—such as, “what are the voices in this piece? and “what might the student have been trying to accomplish in this piece?”—will allow me to quickly look beyond my own predetermined expectations in order to attend to students' thinking. Then I will be able to love my students by engaging with them where they are rather than where I thought they ought to have been.

The most important lesson I take from this study, however, is that despite extensive knowledge about educational practices, despite a research agenda in which student work plays a central role, I am not immune to the influence of old selfish heart habits. Yet even as I prepare to assess the first set of assignments in this new semester, I am hopeful that the process of completing this paper has better positioned me to read students' work more

charitably due to a more heightened awareness of the importance of the interpretive principles I take up during the process. I believe I am better positioned to recognize that which is self-serving and with the help of the Holy Spirit continuing to work within me to intentionally choose to take up more loving interpretive principles. Though I believe it is essential to maintain rigorous learning goals for students, I am inspired to continue to work towards lovingly accepting students where they are—even when they differ dramatically from who I am as a learner.

### **Implications for the Field**

The second goal of a self-study is to contribute to the field more broadly. The field abounds with resources articulating the technical aspects of assessment—definitions of assessment terms, reliability and validity in assessments, how to design and administer different types of assessments, how to phrase effective feedback, and how to create and use rubrics (e.g., Brookhart, 2013; Popham, 2016; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006). Loving assessment practice certainly does require a foundation of technical skills. However, Wineberg (2008) argued that living out our vocation requires not just technical skill, but disciplined attentiveness to our inner lives. Similarly, Hasker (2011) asserted that the integration of faith and learning in applied disciplines, such as education, should include reflection on the attitudes with which we serve others. It would be impossible to enact a loving assessment practice without loving heart attitudes and a “spirit of service” (Hasker, 2011, p. 120). Therefore, this study makes an important contribution to the field by providing a more detailed insider's account of the everyday struggle to enact not just a technically effective assessment practice, but a loving assessment practice. Despite its personal nature, this account is likely to ring true to others in the profession. Thus, it is useful as a case to prompt further inner reflection for other teachers, teacher educators, or prospective teachers.

### **Conclusion**

Love and assessment. Loving students through assessment. Assessment as an act of love. The pairing of these words now appears natural, meaningful, and consequential, no matter the

phrasing. This paper affirms the idea that our work as teachers and teacher educators—even the work of assessment—can indeed be “reimagined as a mission of service...beyond merely our own interests” (Keller, 2012, p. 2). My hope is that readers will recognize themselves and their own struggles in this account and be both challenged and encouraged to strive towards a more loving assessment practice.

## References

- Ball, D. L., & Forzani, F. M. (2009). The work of teaching and the challenge for teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 60(5), 497-511. doi: 10.1177/0022487109348479
- Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998a). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 5(1), 7-73.
- Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998b). Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 80, 139-148.
- Blythe, T., Allen, D., & Powell, B. S. (1999). *Looking at student work together: A companion guide to assessing student learning*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Bomer, K. (2010). *Hidden gems: Naming and teaching from the brilliance in every student's writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Brookhart, S. M. (2013). *How to create and use rubrics for formative assessment and grading*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Edwards, J. (2012). *Charity and its fruits: Living in the light of God's love*. K. Strobel (Ed.). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.
- Grudem, W. A. (2005). *Christian beliefs: Twenty basics every Christian should know*. E. Grudem (Ed.). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Hasker, W. (2011). Faith-learning integration: An overview. In D. W. King (Ed.) *Taking every thought captive: Forty years of the Christian scholars review*. Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press.
- Hattie, J. (2012). *Visible learning for teachers: Maximizing impact on learning*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jacobs, A. (2001). *A theology of reading: The hermeneutics of love*. Cambridge, MA: Westview Press.
- Keller, T. (2012). *Every good endeavor: Connecting your work to God's work*. New York, NY: Riverhead Press.
- LaBoskey, V. K. (2004). The methodology of self-study and its theoretical underpinnings (pp. 817-869). In J. J. Loughran, M. L. Hamilton, V. K. LaBoskey, & T. Russell (Eds.). *International handbook of self-study of teacher education practices*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Labberton, M. (2010). *The dangerous act of loving your neighbor: Seeing others through the eyes of Jesus*. Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Books.
- Lewis, C. S. (1952). *Mere Christianity*. New York, NY: The Macmillan Company.
- Little, J. W., & Horn, I. S. (2007). “Normalizing” problems of practice: Converting routine conversation into a resource for learning in professional communities. In L. Stoll & K. Seashore Louis (Eds.), *Professional learning communities: Divergence, depth and dilemmas* (pp. 79-92). Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Popham, J. (2008). *Transformative assessment*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Popham, J. (2016). *Classroom assessment: What teachers need to know* (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.
- Ryken, L. (2006). The original puritan work ethic. *Christian History & Biography*, 89. Retrieved from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-89/original-puritan-work-ethic.html>

Schuurman, D. J. (2004). *Vocation: Discerning our callings in life*. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Spence, L. K. (2010). Generous reading: Seeing students through their writing. *The Reading Teacher*, 63, 634-642. doi: 10.1598/RT.63.8.2

Spence, L. K. (2014). *Student writing: Give it a generous reading*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Smith, D. I. (2011). Reading practices and Christian pedagogy: Enacting charity with texts. In D. I. Smith & J. K. A. Smith (Eds.), *Teaching and Christian practices: Reshaping faith & learning* (43-60). Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Stiggins, R., Arter, J. Chappuis, J., & Chappuis, S. (2006). *Classroom assessment for student learning: Doing it right—using it well*. Princeton, NJ: Education Testing Service.

Whitney, A. E., Olcese, N., & Squier, V. (2015). “It sounds wrong” vs. “I would be curious”: Challenges in seeing students as writers in a school-university partnership. *Teaching/ Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education*, 4(2). Retrieved from <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte/vol4/iss2/2>

Wineberg, T. W. (2008). *Professional care and vocation: Cultivating ethical sensibilities in teaching*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Wright, N. T. (2010). *After you believe: Why Christian character matters*. New York, NY: Harper One.

York, NY: HarperOne.