

REFLECTIONS OF A NATIONAL BOARD CERTIFIED TEACHER

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STRESS AND SUBMISSION

Looking back at my efforts to prepare my portfolio for review by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), I realize how close I came to missing the deadline and falling short of my goal. If only I had spaced the work out more evenly. As it was, I literally worked up to the last minute compiling things and making furious attempts to revise the various documents. In a last minute burst, I worked for 72 hours straight, sustained by peppermints and a variety of caffeine-laced drinks. In the end, I managed to submit my portfolio just before the deadline, and with a sneaking feeling that I could have done more to show off my best work. In spite of these doubts, once I had mailed it, I felt a sense of relief, calm and resignation. If things came to the worst, and I failed to make the grade this year, I knew that there was always next year and that what I had learned about the process would help me in my quest to become a National Board Certified Teacher.

PURPOSE

Fellow teachers and friends are always curious about my motives in seeking National Board Certification, especially as it costs \$2000, and that's just to apply. People ask me, "Do you earn more pay?" My response is simple: "No. I didn't do it for the money."

Many states on the mainland do recognize the prestige of National Board Certification and provide financial incentives to teachers who are successful in obtaining it. But at the time of my application, Hawai'i was still considering these options. **

The next question is usually: "So if you don't get paid more, does it allow you to teach anywhere in the U.S.?" I'm afraid the answer to that one is also "No." The process, in effect, has nothing to do with obtaining a state license to teach. National Board Certification is designed to recognize professional or more advanced levels of performance rather than outlining minimum licensing standards.

My answers usually produce much head scratching and befuddlement. "So if you don't get paid more, and it doesn't allow you to teach anywhere in the country, why get it?" "Because it's there?" I answer, like Mallory when he was asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest.

Actually, the task did seem quite comparable to climbing a mountain. The stress and toil of compiling the portfolio seemed, at times, an almost endless uphill struggle. In

recording the daily details and reflections, I tended to lose sight of the end point. At times, I could only hazily visualize the summit and the sense of accomplishment that I would achieve on completion. Yet, as I advanced, the benefits of going through the process of certification began to come more clearly into focus.

From the beginning, I considered National Board Certification as a means to challenge myself professionally. The process of certification involved meeting a set of demanding standards established by fellow teachers. My profession had set up a challenge—a high bar—to measure my abilities as an educator. It also offered insights into areas of teaching strength and weakness. Successful or not, I knew I would emerge from the experience a stronger teacher.

THE OUTSET

I first heard about National Board Certification in 1991 as a student in the Master of Education in Teaching Program at

the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. I must have stowed it away in the back of my mind as something I might eventually like to pursue. But for the next seven years, I heard little about it, and I didn't give it much thought. Then, in November of 1998, like all teachers at my school, I received a letter in my box from the Hawai'i Institute for

Educational Partnerships (HIEP) inviting me to apply for National Board Certification. I was intrigued and excitedly called Ann Port, one of the co-directors of the College of Education's partnership with the Department of Education. Ann encouraged me to submit an application. Her office would contact me later regarding a meeting with other candidates.

I soon received an application from HIEP and hurriedly filled it out, one step ahead of the deadline. Fortunately, I met the eligibility requirements. I possessed a baccalaureate degree from the University of Hawai'i, an accredited institution, and I had completed six years of successful teaching, double the minimum of three years that the Board required. Then, a snag occurred. I could not submit proof that I held a valid state teaching license for the previous three years as Hawaii had only replaced a certification system with a licensing system three years prior. Fortunately, my principal, Mary Murakami, helped out by submitting proof that I had taught for six years in an accredited school. Whew!

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Along with the application, I had to pony up \$500, the first installment of the overall fee of \$2000. This may seem exorbitant, especially when compared to the licensing fees of other professionals, even doctors (which range from twenty-five to a few hundred dollars). I consoled myself with the thought that it matched the cost of scoring the performance-based assessment employed by the board. Fortunately, the bite would be lessened by a 50% subsidy provided by various agencies including the Hawaii Business Round Table and the federal government.

THE COHORT

Later in December, I joined four similarly inclined candidates at the offices of the Hawaii State Teachers Association (HSTA) to learn more about the climb that lay ahead of us. I sat along

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side Dr Anne Freese, whom I had asked to serve as my advocate (NBPTS terminology for mentor or advisor). The others had brought along their advocates, too. We met with Ann Port and Phil Whitesel of HIEP, Sharon Mahoe of the Hawaii Teacher Standards Board (HTSB), and Karen Ginoza and Arlene Lee of HSTA. Mary Ann Joseph, a recent transplant to Hawaii and a successful Board certified teacher, served as our facilitator.

Karen Ginoza, President of the HSTA, welcomed us and applauded our willingness to brave the challenges ahead. She informed us that the average candidate puts in 120 hours compiling a portfolio. She reminded us that we represented Hawaii's first effort towards National Board Certification and were, in a real sense, the pioneers who would beat the path for others to follow. She offered the union's full support in our quest for this honor, including the use of laptop computers and the cost of transportation for neighbor island candidates. She also promised to help search for additional funds, which she later obtained, to help defray the application fee. Arlene Lee would serve as the HSTA's point person.

Ann Port and Phil Whitesel, co-directors of the HIEP explained the role of the Partnership in the certification

process. They shared how HIEP was a formal partnership between Hawai'i's State Department of Education and the University of Hawai'i. They pledged their support, extending promises for the use of equipment and resources as well as helping to connect us to people from the university who might offer expertise and advice.

Sharon Mahoe, executive director of the Hawai'i Teachers' Standards Board, explained the differences between National Board Certification and state licensing. National Board Certification is a voluntary process while state licensing is mandatory. State licensing is designed to test for the minimum qualifications that novice teachers must possess when entering the profession. National Board Certification, however, is awarded only to experienced and accomplished teachers and in recognition of a mature level of professional practice.

THE NATIONAL BOARD FOR PROFESSIONAL TEACHING STANDARDS

Sharon explained how National Board Certification emerged from the recommendations made in *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (1983), a report released by the Carnegie Corporation's Task Force on Teaching as a Profession. The report advocated the establishment of professional teaching standards and the certification of teachers who meet those standards. The NBPTS was founded in 1987 with the help of the U.S. Department of Education, the National Science Foundation, and a wide range of foundations, corporations and other private entities.

Sharon likened NBPTS to the American Bar Association or the American Medical Association. The NBPTS has a similar form and function. It aims "to establish high and rigorous standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do, to develop and operate a national, voluntary system to assess and certify teachers who meet these standards and to advance related education reforms for the purpose of improving student learning in American schools." Teachers form the majority of the 63 member board of directors. The others are school administrators, school board leaders, governors and state legislators, higher education officials, teacher union leaders, and business and community leaders. Classroom teachers also contributed to the establishment of the standards and serve as assessors. Most importantly, they design and continually review a publicly acceptable and legally defensible system of certification.

Sharon described how the NBPTS assembled committees of distinguished teachers to develop standards for various certification fields, structured around developmental levels and subject area. These fields ranged from Early Childhood Generalists to Adolescent/Young Adulthood Mathematics. By 1999, the committees had already drafted standards for nineteen fields. (There are now twenty-one fields with nine more in the development phase). For each set, the commit-

tees feature particular aspects of teaching, holistic in nature and reflective of accomplished practice. They provided a narrative illustrating how the standards are exemplified and observable in the classroom. Moreover, they ensured each standard reflected the five propositions in the NBPTS policy statement, What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do.

THE FIVE CORE PROPOSITIONS

Mary Ann Joseph, a recently certified National Board teacher, who had only recently moved to Hawai'i with her family, was our sole contact with someone who had actually gone through the process. Mary Ann agreed to act as our facilitator and, as it turned out, she proved a valuable resource and important guide for us. In this sort of venture, it's useful to have along an experienced guide.

Mary Ann outlined the "Five Propositions of Accomplished Teaching" of the NBPTS, the principles that lie at the heart of each set of standards for each certification field. Mary Ann explained what each one meant and how we must use them to organize and structure our portfolio.

- Teachers are committed to students and their learning. In addition to believing that all students can learn, accomplished teachers regard students equitably and assure that knowledge is accessible to everyone. Teachers do this by modifying their practice and by heeding the context and cultural factors that influence student behavior.
- Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students. While many people regard subject knowledge as the most important quality of an expert teacher, they often neglect the importance of the ability to communicate, translate, and share this knowledge with students. Accomplished teachers connect subject knowledge and pedagogic knowledge to enable students to learn.
- Teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning. Instead of simply presenting subject matter, skilled teachers orchestrate lessons and help to create a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. They provide a context for learning that sustains student interest. They design lessons with intent and purpose, utilizing their assessment of individual students to maximize learning. These teachers can also clearly articulate their intent to parents.
- Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience. Expert teachers consistently seek opportunities to improve. They study and reflect upon their actions and make informed adjustments. They match their classroom with current pedagogical research and are willing to act as researchers with their students.

Knowing their students well, these teachers make conscientious judgments about sound teaching methods.

- Teachers are members of learning communities. Accomplished teachers are members of professional organizations, action-research groups, school committees, and curriculum teams. They work with their peers as well as parents in the interest of improving student learning. They bring the community into their classroom while exposing their students to opportunities to positively impact their community.

After we had discussed the five propositions, each of us recorded evidence that exemplified these propositions in our own practice. I scoured the nooks and crannies of my mind for examples.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE BOX

Just after Christmas 1999, a box arrived in the mail. It was from the NBPTS. I was surprised at its size. I decided to put it away and look at it after the holidays. After all, the final deadline of April 16, was enough far off.

But barely had the holidays finished when our next cohort meeting arrived. I needed to do my homework and look over the contents of the box. A quick review revealed several envelopes, a page of address labels imprinted with bar codes, a book of standards, a packet of portfolio instructions, and directions about how to repack and return the box once completed. I flipped through the standards, taking time to highlight key phrases in two of the twelve standards.

At the next meeting, we brought our boxes along, examined the portfolio requirements and did some reflective writing. I learned that despite the different certification fields, the portfolio requirements were generally similar. Each portfolio requires the candidate to complete four classroom-based exercises. Two of those areas require videotapes to be made: one of classroom interactions or discussions, and another that includes collections of certain kinds of student work. All entries were to be accompanied by a written narrative that included a description of the teaching activity, an analysis and reflection. Moreover, the narrative could be no longer than 10 pages and had to conform to strict format guidelines, including the use of specific fonts and point sizes.

The last part of the portfolio, Documented Accomplishments, focused on the candidate's work outside the classroom with families, colleagues and community. We had to show evidence of our accomplishments and relate them to student learning within their subject area. Mary Ann instructed us to concentrate on this area first as it necessitated gathering written evidence from various people, including parents, on professional activities such as workshops that we had

attended and contributions to curriculum committees.

Mary Ann also recommended that we immediately start preparing to videotape our lessons. Parents would have to fill out and return permission forms, and students needed to become accustomed to being filmed. We also had to get hold of equipment and enlist the assistance of a competent camera operator. Sharon shared a video with the group on how to videotape lessons for the portfolio.

The video had to be 20 minutes of continuous filming and to remain unedited. Student voices had to be audible and easily understood. I realized instantly that if I ran a lab, the camera could not be stationary. The camera operator would have to follow me around. She would also need to use a pressure zone microphone or its equivalent to capture the students' discussions.

VIDEOTAPING AND OTHER PITFALLS

I lost no time in making a start. Unfortunately, a number of hidden obstacles lay in wait for me. The camera was no problem. I could easily borrow one from the school. The problem was to find a pressure zone microphone. I combed Honolulu looking for one. The cheapest model I could find doubled the price that I had been quoted at the meeting. But as they were scarce there was no alternative than to buy one.

Collecting permission forms went slowly as the students demonstrated their time-honored efficiency and creativity in making elaborate excuses for not turning them in. After a week of niggling, I was ready to film. The first attempt went horribly. The camera I borrowed did not allow for an external microphone. I needed to find another one that had a jack for external microphones. Filming was delayed further.

The second attempt, with the proper camera, went even more badly than the first one. I knew that students would react to the presence of a camera. I even predicted that there would be technical problems with hearing all the students' voices. But I did not foresee that we would record no sound at all. For some reason the microphone malfunctioned. After trouble-shooting and several more attempts, I discovered that the extension cable used with the microphone was faulty.

Finally, I managed to find a cable that worked, and I began taping in earnest. But even with a reliable extension cable, the microphone proved to be inadequate for recording a whole-class discussion. I did what I should have done at the beginning and sought the advice of our school's resident audio-visual expert. He told me that we had several microphones that would be ideal for the various activities that I planned to record. I borrowed a tiny microphone designed for conferences to tape class discussions. Fortunately, my purchase of the pressure zone microphone was not entirely useless: it would be perfect for recording my interaction with lab groups.

This process of trial and error learning ate up about six weeks of precious time, and the lessons I wanted to feature in

the videotapes had already been taught. I would have to film another class and plan additional units. In addition, I still needed to write about what I had videotaped. Time was quickly slipping away.

LEARNING MAJOR IDEAS IN SMALL AMOUNTS OF TIME

While enduring the trials and exertions of getting the video camera and microphone to record properly, I began work on my first written portfolio entry: Teaching a Major Idea Over Time. I would tackle the other entries such as Active Scientific Inquiry, Whole Class Discussion, and Assessing Student Work later. Not only would I have to explain how I taught a major idea over a period of time, I would also be required to describe the context and culture of the classroom in every lesson I taught. Specifications for each entry were laid out in precise detail down to the size of the margins, the length of the narrative and font and point size.

As I struggled to write and gather evidence of meeting each standard, my writing grew muddled. Fortunately, I possessed excellent advocates in Dr. Anne Freese from the College of Education, Diane Cheung, Kailua High School's staff development specialist, and Kathy Ellwin, Kailua High School's registrar. They served as diligent readers who were always ready with valuable suggestions for improvement. Anne helped to clarify my writing. Kathy helped me to narrow my scope. Diane helped me to find focus. I took their critical advice seriously and used their comments to strengthen subsequent entries. The April deadline was rapidly approaching, and I seemed still no closer to completing my assignments.

Given the looming deadline, I made a rather rash decision. My cousin was getting married on the mainland during spring break, and I had promised to attend the wedding. I still needed to videotape one more lesson and write four more entries. But I could still keep to deadline. All I needed to do was take my journals and a laptop with me and write on the plane. Somehow, my resolution failed me and my thoughts were given over to the prospect, during my week away, of visiting one of the world's great art galleries.

With only three weeks remaining, I played catch-up by writing nightly on the laptop till 2 a.m. During the day, I finished videotaping and began to compile my evidence for the portfolio entries in the section entitled Documented Accomplishments.

With one week to go, my principal, Mary Murakami asked if I needed to take some time off to finish. I considered her offer, but I was getting close and felt confident that I could complete my work over the weekend. Unfortunately, in spite of my efforts in front of the computer, the two days slipped by with little progress. I studied my students' assignments, deliberating endlessly over which would best illustrate the effectiveness of my teaching, without picking one.

My principal's offer began to look more and more appealing. I took the rest of the week off. The days that followed literally blurred into one another. I went home from school on Monday and continued working straight until Thursday evening, completing the portfolio just in time. I even managed in my dazed state to complete the exacting directions for returning the completed documents. That night, I slept a sound and dreamless sleep, and took the next day off to recover.

Even if I had not been successful in gaining national certification, I would still have found value in the process. Others have reported the same benefits. I became intimately familiar with my teaching. I concentrated deeply upon my students and became more aware of their learning needs and of responsive teaching strategies. I opened my thoughts up to my peers and mentors for their review and advice. I put my teaching under the microscope and, as a result, realized practical benefits as a classroom teacher.

RESIGNATION AND RELIEF

With the portfolio in the mail, I felt relieved. But I had submitted it without the benefit of the comments of my advocates. At least, if it failed to satisfy this time, I could revise it gradually and try again next year. NBPTS would allow me to bank my test scores for three years, and I could resubmit any low scoring portfolio entries. It would cost me \$275. But this seemed a small price in comparison to the initial \$2000.

THE ASSESSMENT CENTER

The Assessment Center represented the last hoop I needed to jump through for certification. The Assessment Center exercises focus primarily on written responses pedagogical content knowledge questions. I took mine on a computer at the Sylvan Technology Center. The exam lasted for six hours.

Having learned my lesson on the business of composing my portfolio, I made every preparation in studying for the Assessment Center. As a physics teacher, I had applied for

National Board Certification in Adolescent/Young Adulthood Science. I was confident in my knowledge of physics, but the test would be a comprehensive one that covered a wide range of topics in the sciences. I took the month of June off, forgoing my usual stint conducting teacher workshops. Once school ended, I buried my nose into several books, studying concepts in Earth and Space Science, Biology, and Chemistry. As notes were allowed into the Assessment Center, I took an abundant set. I studied during the day and slept comfortably at night.

The Assessment Center appointment arrived quickly, and this time I was well-prepared and rested. The six hours zoomed by. I felt confident. The test was no mere multiple-choice exam. I had to design lessons and describe common misconceptions students hold about certain concepts. If anything, I wished that I had reviewed physics before taking the test.

THANKSGIVING

The results came back early. We were told that we probably would not be notified of our status until the end of the year. However, NBPTS sent an email informing me that I could expect a reply around Thanksgiving. Nothing came on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. I would have to wait till Friday. I slept restlessly. On Thanksgiving day, the doorbell rang. Expecting no one, especially the mail carrier, I casually approached the door. My neighbor was standing there with an express mail envelope. She informed me that she had collected my mail on Wednesday before I came home. I tore it from her hands, thanking her, too nervous to open the package neatly. Inside, I found a tally of my scores. My portfolio scores were marginal. But, my Assessment Center scores were good, and enough to make up for the shortfall in the other sections. I had made it. I felt thrilled and relieved. I could hardly believe it.

DENOUEMENT

Looking back, my success was largely due to hard work and the help of my advisors and other supporters. I had placed myself under stress and was unsatisfied with portions of my portfolio. But I was also well prepared to undergo the process. I have those taught and worked with me to thank. For one, the MET taught me to reflect upon my practice and continues to help refine my teaching by involving me in their community of learners at Kailua High School. Second, my colleagues provided a rich source of support and knowledge for such an endeavor. I am surrounded by good role models, colleagues who exemplify quality teaching and generously helped me in achieving my goals. Finally, the other candidates, HIEP, HSTA, HTSB, and Mary Ann guided me through the process. I needed this supportive network; I could not have done it alone.



Top (l-r) Building polyhedra from polyhedrons; teachers judging students' work in relation to Hawai'i mathematics standards and Derek Minakami.



Yet, even if I had not been successful in gaining national certification, I would still have found value in the process. Others have reported the same benefits. I became intimately familiar with my teaching. I concentrated deeply upon my students and became more aware of their learning needs and of responsive teaching strategies. I opened my thoughts up to my peers and mentors for their review and advice. I put my teaching under the microscope and, as a result, realized practical benefits as a classroom teacher.

Most teachers who attempt the process of certification recount similar feelings. They feel that they have honed their teaching skills. They feel a renewed sense of enthusiasm for the profession. In the end, it is their students who become the major beneficiaries of this renewal.

The NBPTS and the process of National Board Certification elevates the teaching profession as a whole. By recognizing quality teachers in every community, it raises the public's

perception of teachers, renews confidence in our educational system, and reinstates it as one of the cornerstones of our Democracy.

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