ST. CLOUD STATE UNIVERSITY TEACHER EDUCATION UNIT

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

MTLE READING WORKSHOP (FALL, 2012): A BRIEF EVALUATION

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Background/ Context

The Minnesota Teacher Licensure Examination (MTLE) Basic Skills tests are required for evaluation of P-12 teacher candidates in Minnesota. These Basic Skills tests assess candidates' abilities in reading, writing, and mathematics. Because of concerns about passing rates, the SCSU education unit is moving toward requiring passage of the examinations prior to student teaching or even prior to admission to teacher education, though these decisions have not yet been made across the School of Education.

In an effort to improve the passing rates of SCSU students, the Student Services Office, through its MTLE Center, offers test preparation workshops on each of the MTLE Basic Skills content areas. In September 2012, the MTLE Center sponsored a workshop on the reading skills; 20 candidate-participants provided evaluative feedback.

The students completed a survey allowing them to indicate strands on *MTLE Reading* wherein they lacked skill or confidence. Table 1 shows the percent of respondents that *did not* feel skilled or confident in skills sorted by category (strand).

Table 1. Perceived skill deficits on the part of SCSU education candidates who failed *MTLE Reading* at least one time.

Strand/Skill	**N Nominating**	**Percent Nominating**
Strand 1: Understanding the meaning of words and phrases		
Determine the meaning of uncommon words –paragraph or passage	15	75
Determine the meaning of uncommon words with multiple meanings	9	45
Determine the meaning of figurative language	7	35
Identify appropriate synonyms or antonyms	4	20
Average nominations/ Strand 1		**44**
Strand 2: Understanding the main idea and supporting details in a written passage		
Identified ***implied*** main idea	15	75
Identify the stated main idea in paragraph or passage	6	30
Recognize ideas, information, data, and details that support main idea	4	20
Average nominations Strand 2		**42**

Table 1, Continued

Strand/Skill	N Nominating	Percent Nominating
Strand 3: Understanding a writer's purpose, point of view, and intended meaning		
Recognizing a writer's stated or implied purpose for writing	14	70
Identify the audience for a given piece / appropriateness for that audience	7	35
Recognize likely effect on a reader of a writer's choice of words	5	25
Interpret content, word choice, and phrasing to determine writer's point of view or opinion	5	25
Average nominations Strand 3		**39**
Strand 4: Analyzing the relationships between ideas in written material		
Identify organizational strategy used by the writer to convey ideas	14	70
Drawing conclusions from information stated or implied in a paragraph or passage	12	60
Identifying cause-effect relationships	10	50
Analyzing relationships between similar ideas or ideas in opposition	7	35
Identifying sequence of events or steps described in written material	5	25
Average nominations for strand 4		**48**
Strand 5: Using critical reasoning skills to evaluate written materials		
Identifying the assumptions underlying a writer's argument	14	70
Evaluating the logic of a writer's argument	12	60
Assessing the credibility, objectivity, or bias of the writer or the sources used by the writer	7	35
Distinguishing between statements of fact and expressions of opinions and recognizing words that signal opinions or judgments	5	25
Assessing the relevance of facts, examples, or data to a writer's argument	2	10
Average nominations for strand 5		**40**
Strand 6: Applying skills for outlining and summarizing information in written materials and interpreting information presented in graphic forms		
Identifying an effective summary of information presented	8	40
Recognizing an effective outline or graphic representation of information	4	20
Interpreting data and drawing conclusions from information presented in charts, tables diagrams, maps, or other graphic forms	3	15
Average nominations for strand 6		**25**

As can be seen from Table 1, Strand 4 (Analyzing the relationships between ideas in written material) appears to be the reading skill domain wherein candidates report the most difficulty. This is followed closely by Strand 1 (Understand the meaning of words and phrases). Since *MTLE* scores are not reported by strands or domain, it is difficult to ascertain the objective reality of perceived deficits. However, these data may prove useful in light of the fact that candidates for teaching positions nearing student teaching probably have enough training and self-awareness to make reasonably precise self-determinations.

In a further attempt to clarify perceived reading weaknesses, we have provided, in descending order, all skills where more than half of this cohort indicated weaknesses or lack of confidence (Table 2). Along with Strands 1 and 4, these may serve as useful targets for remedial programs as candidates come into teaching programs.

Table 2. Perceived reading problems in descending order.

Strand/Skill	**N Nominating (of 20)**	**Percent Nominating**
Strand 1: Determine the meaning of uncommon words –paragraph or passage	15	75
Strand 2: Identified ***implied*** main idea	15	75
Strand 3: Recognizing a writer's stated or ***implied*** purpose for writing	14	70
Strand 4: Identify organizational strategy used by the writer to convey ideas	14	70
Strand 5: Identifying the assumptions underlying a writer's argument	14	70
Strand 4: Drawing conclusions from information stated or implied in a paragraph or passage	12	60
Strand 5: Evaluating the logic of a writer's argument	12	60
Strand 4: Identifying cause-effect relationships	10	50

Workshop participants were asked to list the three elements of the workshop in descending order in terms of the helpfulness of that strand. These results are laid out in Table 3. The reading and testing strategies offered by the instructor was viewed as the most helpful aspect of the Reading Workshop, followed by the skill practice sessions. Only one participant viewed the self-assessment as most helpful (See Tables 1 and 2 for results based on this activity).

Table 3. Rank order results for effectiveness of the program strands.

Workshop Topics	**Number of times ranked "most helpful"**	**Percent ranked "most helpful"**
Strategies	12	71
Practice	6	35
Self-assessment	1	6
TOTAL doing task	17	100

Table 4. Participant comments regarding activities in future that would prove helpful.

Suggestion	**N of Times Offered**	**% of Times Offered**
Having more practice	7	50
Access to the practice tests	2	14
[More] testing strategies	2	14
Getting other perspectives on the answers	2	14
More prep materials	1	7
TOTAL suggestions	14	100

Finally, participants provided comments on things that would help them to manage *MTLE Reading* (see Table 4). Candidate responses suggested the theme of test preparation in the form of more practice (N = 7, 50% [of total suggestions]), more and better access to practice tests, training in test-taking strategies, and help gaining perspective on why particular responses were correct or incorrect. About half of the responses contained written statements complimenting the instructor: "Thank you SO (sic) much for this workshop. [It] really has been helpful."

Executive Summary

1. At the raw numbers level, respondents appeared to be very uncertain about their reading skills. On average, each candidate selected 10 skills (M = 9.7, range = 4 to 14). This represents 42% of the 24 skills putatively tapped by *MTLE Reading* (range of nominations = 17% to 58%).

2. Though the analysis by strand did not identify clear targets for intervention, it appears that candidates may benefit from training and practice related to analyzing ideas and the relationships between them. In addition, not all candidates may come to St. Cloud State with sufficient semantic (vocabulary) development (Strand 1). We may need to systematically address the breadth of their lexicon.

3. Interpreting quantitative and symbolic representations appear to be comparative strengths for this cohort.

4. In analyzing problematic items across strands, a three-part picture emerges. This, of course, requires considerably more research. However, it appears that, to the degree that this cohort is representative (primarily of education candidates who struggle with *MTLE Reading)*, it may pay to monitor progress and provide enrichment in the following domains:

    - Vocabulary and semantic development generally, including the ability to analyze words from affixes and from their Latin and Greek roots (uncommon words)

    - Candidates indicated that they struggled with the intersection between logic, abstractions, and reading. That is, they struggled with the ability to process information deeply and apply [the rules of] logic to understanding paragraphs and passages (reading between the lines for implications, understanding the writer's assumptions, drawing conclusions, understanding cause-effect, and evaluating writers' logic)

    - Candidates seem to experience difficulty with what might be called the meta skills of reading comprehension, meaning the ability to "think" like a writer as an aid to comprehension (picking out the writers' assumptions, identifying writers' organizational strategies, identifying writers' implied ideas)

5. These data represent perceptions of problems and were gathered from a small sample. We should continue to monitor both test scores and opinion data. Should the skills identified here prove to be true roadblocks for candidates, it may prove worthwhile to invest in an instrument that taps the abstract reading and semantic skills. An alternative would be to develop an

instrument (assessment process) in house. This could be employed early-on as a pretest for individuals who self-identify as prospective teaching majors. Both individual and group interventions could be developed based on assessment system findings.

6. We will continue to monitor the performance of candidates who attend the instructional workshops, comparing their performance (in time series designs) to past efforts and to similar candidates who do not attend workshops.

7. While participants penned many positive remarks about the session itself, many expressed the opinion that they needed more practice, on the test (N = 7) and on the skills in question.