# Dialogic and Generative Reflection:

# An Application of the Critical Appreciative Process in Program Evaluation

Ye He

University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Tiffany L. Smith
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Malitsitso Moteane University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Background: Even though the positive potential of reflective practice is widely acknowledged across professional fields, it has been recognized that reflective practice may be carried out primarily as an individual-based exercise, and at the technical or descriptive level without generative impact. Dialogic reflective processes involving both evaluators and program directors are far from being systematically implemented or examined.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this article is to share our experiences engaging in dialogic and generative reflections as the project director and program evaluators of a K-12 teacher education program using the critical appreciative process. Building upon the reflective practice traditions in both disciplinary areas, we introduce the use of the critical appreciative process as a promising model to guide dialogic and generative reflection to support the co-design and improvement of the program and accompanying evaluation efforts.

Setting: The project director and evaluators are engaged in a grant-funded teacher preparation project designed to prepare teachers for K-12 English learners and dual language learners. The project builds upon partnerships between the university teacher preparation program and two local school districts. The evaluation plan was designed based on culturally responsive, collaborative, and use-focused evaluation approaches and theory. In 2020, the project team faced critical decisions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: We applied self-study methodology to guide data collection and analysis in this study. The primary data source included individual written reflections and group critical friend dialogues guided by the critical appreciative process. Both the reflections and meeting notes were analyzed to identify convergent and divergent perspectives shared throughout the critical appreciative process and to highlight implications for both the evaluation and the program moving forward.

**Findings:** Convergent and divergent perspectives from both the project director and the evaluators were shared based on the 4-D critical appreciative process: Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver. Based on this shared experience, we illustrate how the dialogic reflective process entails reflexivity and requires pausing; how reflective practice in program evaluation situates our dialogues as learning-oriented rather than a mere accountability discussion; and how reflective action can create a dialogic and generative virtuous cycle.

Keywords: reflective practice; evaluation; critical appreciative process

# Introduction

Reflective practice is highlighted as part of the core professional practices for competent evaluators (American Evaluation Association 2018). The Professional Practice domain of the AEA Evaluator Competencies (2018) specifies that the competent evaluator "reflects on evaluation formally or informally to improve practice" (Competency "identifies personal areas of professional competence and needs for growth" and "pursues ongoing (Competency 1.6), professional development to deepen reflective practice, stay current, and build connections" (Competency 1.7). Evaluation researchers have also discussed the potential impact of reflective practices far beyond evaluators' individual professional growth (e.g., Archibald et al., 2018; Smith & Skolits, in press). Even though the positive potential of reflective practice is widely acknowledged not only in the program evaluation profession but also across a wide range of professional fields (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004; Ruffinelli, et al., 2020; Thompson & Thompson, 2008), dialogic reflective processes involving both evaluators and program directors are far from being systematically implemented or examined.

The critical appreciative process (CAP) is a strengths-based approach that can be employed to guide reflective processes and research inquiries. CAP builds Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a research strategy that challenges the problem-solving approach, emphasizes socially constructed realities, and highlights social innovation potential through the generation of new ideas, images and theories (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Emphasizing the constructionist premises and dialogic nature of AI, CAP integrates AI with critical inquiry and grounded theory to achieve generative potential through dialogic reflective processes. While the principles and process of AI have been applied in evaluation practice (e.g., Coghlan et al., 2003; Preskill & Catsambas, 2006), the application of CAP in program evaluation needs to be further explored.

In this article, we share our experiences, as the project director and program evaluators of a teacher preparation program, to apply CAP as a dialogic and generative reflective process for evaluation planning and program improvement. We illustrate the potential to integrate and leverage reflective practice traditions across different disciplinary areas to inform evaluation planning and program improvement. Lessons learned are discussed for the integration of such dialogic and generative reflective practices into the evaluation process.

#### Literature Review

Reflective practice in both program evaluation and teacher education builds upon Dewey's (1933) and Schön's (1983) conceptualizations. Emphasizing the duality of reflection and action, reflective practice is defined as a selfregulated process through which individuals may negotiate the consonance and dissonance between their own beliefs, practices, and experiences and those shared by other professionals (Schön, 1983). In this section, we start by providing background literature regarding reflective practice in both program evaluation and the specific disciplinary area, teacher education. Building upon reflective practice traditions in professions, we introduce the use of CAP as a promising model to guide dialogic and generative reflection to support the co-design and improvement of the program and accompanying evaluation efforts.

# Reflective Practice in Program Evaluation

Reflective practice has been identified as a tool or component in a number of evaluation approaches, including utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 2012), evaluation for organizational learning and evaluation capacity building (Preskill & Torres, 1999), developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011), and interactive evaluation practice (King & Stevahn, 2013). In addition, critical theory has been employed in program evaluation to promote a transformational agenda and guide evaluator reflective practices (e.g., Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010). However, based on the American Evaluation Association's competencies, the concept of reflective practice in evaluation seems to be limited to refer to evaluators' individual-based reflective practices. Only recently has the field begun to

explore the complexity and impact of reflective practice in evaluation (e.g., Archibald et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2015; Smith & Skolits, in press). For example, Smith and Skolits (in press) argue that reflective practice is necessarily relational and requires collaboration to achieve optimum impact.

Emphasizing the interactions between evaluative thinking and critically reflective practice, Archibald et al. (2018) proposed four levels of intersection between evaluation and reflective practices: macro, meso, micro, and meta. The macro-level intersection is where the evaluator is able to reflect on their own role as well as the role of the profession in society broadly and the collective or "common good." At the meso-level, evaluators focus on their own self-awareness and expertise, including their need for professional development and growth (similar to the **AEA** 2018 competencies). At the micro-level, evaluators are constantly aware and have a skeptical, inquisitive point of view during their practices. Finally, the fourth level is meta-reflection on the three other levels. These distinctions separate reflective practices that focus on evaluators' own professional growth (i.e. mesolevel) and their own practices (i.e. micro-level) from the macro-level interaction that reflects evaluators' emancipatory aspiration to engage in reflection that leads to empowered actions to challenge structures of power (Archibald et al., 2018; Brookfield, 2000). The notion of critical reflection and the need for critical theory becomes highly salient in this conceptualization of reflective practice in evaluation, where the focus is on examining the roots of inequities and social systems of society.

When implementing reflective practices through program evaluation, evaluators not only employ reflection to guide their evaluation practices, but also for learning through both critical self-reflection and interactions with others in the evaluation context (van Draanen, 2017; Smith et al., 2015; Smith & Skolits, in press). Van Draanen (2017), for example, emphasized the potential of critical self-reflection or reflexivity that can challenge "taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the political nature of our work and its (intended and unintended) effects, as well as the social distribution of these effects" (p.61). Reflecting on her own evaluation practice, van Draanen

(2017) illustrated how critical self-reflection can highlight power and privilege, assumptions, biases, self-awareness, and politics and suggested that integrating reflective practice in evaluation can increase awareness of both self and context.

To engage in critical self-reflection and collaborative reflective practices with others, evaluators need to situate themselves as learners throughout the evaluation process. Preskill (2008) argued that evaluation's purpose is primarily for learning. She reflected that the answer to how we embody a culture of evaluation lies in

Consciously infusing learning in every aspect of our theory and practice... this means we are committed to learning about programs and their underlying assumptions; learning about evaluation practice within a wide range of contexts and cultures; learning about the diversity of legitimate stakeholder perspectives; learning about the power of data, information, and knowledge; and of course, learning about what constitutes ethical and principled evaluation practice (p. 129).

Instead of viewing evaluators merely as technical experts, Rallis and Rossman (2000) suggested that evaluators should serve as "critical friends" who engage in reflective dialogue with program staff to collaboratively interpret evaluation data and generate actions for both program improvement and evaluation design.

To initiate collaborative reflective dialogues between evaluators and program stakeholders, it is important to recognize the reflective practice tradition in the disciplinary area as well. Focusing on the evaluation of a teacher preparation program in this study, next we offer an overview of the reflective practice background in the field of teacher education.

#### Reflective Practice in Teacher Education

Reflective practice has been widely adopted in teacher education programs since the 1980s (e.g., Valli, 1992; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Teacher educators have embedded the reflection process to accompany teacher candidates' field experiences and engage

teacher candidates in discussions about teaching practices that consider sociocultural contexts. Similar to the discussion of reflective practice in evaluation (e.g., Archibald et al., 2018), different reflective models have been proposed in teacher education (e.g., Hatton & Smith, 1995; Taggart & Wilson, 2005). Building upon Schön's (1983) reflection-inaction and reflection-on-action, Hatton and Smith (1995) highlighted reflection-in-action as contextualized reflection, and further divided reflection-on-action into descriptive, dialogic, and critical reflection that are beyond technical reflection. Teachers are expected to engage in reflections to examine power underlying dynamics, uncover their assumptions and meanings of teaching actions, and critically reflect on equity and access issues in education (Lyons, 2006; Zeichner & Liu, 2010).

However, there is a lack of clarity in the definition of reflective practice and its application in teacher education in general (e.g., Beauchamp, 2006, 2015; Collin, et al., 2013; Fendler, 2003). Based on her theoretical analysis of 55 definitions of reflective practice, Beauchamp (2006) proposed a distinction among processes of reflection, objects of the reflective practice, and rationales reflection. The processes include examining, thinking and understanding, problem solving, analyzing, evaluating, constructing, developing or transforming. The objects include practice, social knowledge, experiences, information, theories, meaning, beliefs, self, and issues of concern. The rationales or purposes may include more clear or different thinking, justification of one's stance, guiding actions or decisions, altering self or society, or improving student learning. Collin, et al. (2013) expanded this description to highlight that reflective practice is grounded in action and that it "takes place in the social individual. not just the professional individual" (p. 106).

While there are no conclusive findings regarding the impact of reflective practice (e.g., Russell, 2013) and it has generally been conceptualized as an individual process in teacher education (e.g., Zeichner & Liston, 1996), researchers have called for teacher educators to model reflective practice as a social and collective endeavor (e.g., Collin & Karsenti, 2011; Poom-Valickis & Mathews,

2013). In addition to engaging in self-study reflections (e.g., Attard, 2017; McCarthy, 2018), teacher educators may also consider developing reflective practices through verbal interactions with one another or even with researchers beyond the education discipline (Collin & Karsenti, 2011). The dialogic reflective engagement may further broaden the concept of reflective practice beyond western traditions and present new insights to support teacher education program improvement (Collin et al., 2013).

In the next section, we introduce CAP as a strengths-based approach that can be used to guide the dialogic reflective process to engage participants from different backgrounds. In this study, the evaluators and project director in a teacher preparation program used CAP to intentionally incorporate the reflective process into evaluation and project planning efforts in a dialogic and generative manner.

### Critical Appreciative Process (CAP)

CAP is a process that expands the strengths-based research approach, Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI follows five core principles and the 4-D model for implementation.

The five core principles include the constructionist principle, principle simultaneity, poetic principle, anticipatory principle, and positive principle (Cooperrider 2001). The constructionist Whitney, principle suggests the constructed nature of knowledge, building upon social interactions and dialogues among stakeholders with different backgrounds and experiences. It reflects Gergen's (1978) notion of generative "to challenge the capacity guiding of assumptions the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, foster to reconsideration of that which is 'taken for granted' and thereby furnish new alternatives for social actions" (p.1346). Bushe (2013), for example, details ways to engage in the generative process through ΑI for transformational change. The principle of simultaneity articulates inquiry intervention process. AI acknowledges the influence of researchers' positioning in the research process (Cooperrider et al., 1995). Decisions regarding what research questions

to focus on, what methodologies to use, who to invite to participate in the inquiry, and for whom the report is written and disseminated impact how the programs are being documented for future decision making. The poetic principle emphasizes the co-authored nature of the stories through the inquiry process. Both Bushe (2001) and Ludema (2002) illustrated how new narratives can be generated over time through the co-authoring process to challenge the macro-narrative or the taken-for-granted assumptions. The anticipatory principle reflects the potential of inquiry as a collective process that generates positive imagery to initiate and sustain the momentum for innovation and change. Finally, the positive principle highlights the importance of cultivating positive affect and the sense of hope in the change process (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). AI scholars later also added the wholeness principle to stress the importance of engaging stakeholders in collective story generation, the enactment principle to advocate transformation in the present, and the free choice principle to emphasize the liberating power of offering options for engaged inquiry.

The AI 4-D model articulates the process including Discovery, Dream, Design, and Delivery/Destiny (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003). The Discovery phase invites share their participants to positive, provocative, and inspiring experiences that they appreciate; the Dream phase engages participants to discuss collective envisioned outcomes and potentials; the Design phase empowers participants to co-construct innovative plans of action to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions; and the Delivery/Destiny phase supports participants to enact the innovative design and make thoughtful adjustments and improvisations to promote change.

These principles and the 4-D model have been applied in program evaluations to engage and empower stakeholders (e.g., Mohr et al., 2000; Odell, 2002; Rama et al., 2018). Building upon Patton's (1997) notion of process use, Coghlan et al. (2003) argues that the intentional engagement of stakeholders in the evaluation process promotes sustained change:

By being intentional about learning throughout the evaluation; encouraging

dialogue and reflection; questioning assumptions, values, and beliefs; and creating learning spaces and opportunities, individuals may come to more fully understand the evaluand, the organization or community, themselves, each other, and ultimately evaluation practice. (p.16)

The participatory and generative nature of the AI process is aligned with the engagement and empowerment goals of evaluation and has also been used in the evaluation of teacher education efforts (e.g., Allen & Innes, 2013; Anderson et al., 2016).

The use of AI has also received criticism (e.g., Boje, 2010; Fitzgerald et al., 2010; Grant & Humphries, 2006). With an emphasis on the positive principle, there may be attempts to dichotomize positives versus negatives or strengths versus deficits in AI applications. This polarization mindset may lead to lessengaged inquiry processes where desired positivity is predetermined from a single perspective, instead co-constructed, of negotiated and recognized as multiple, partial and dynamic (Bushe, 2013). To highlight the dialogic nature of AI, researchers have elaborated on the integration of AI and critical inquiry (CI).

Grant and Humphries (2006), for example, proposed CAP in evaluation. Recognizing the "apparent paradox", they highlighted the constructionist premises as the common epistemological and base the shared emancipatory intent underlying both AI and CI. Ridley-Duff and Duncan (2015) integrated AI, CI and grounded theory and applied CAP in their exploration of narratives from Pakistani research assistants based on their use of AI throughout a three-year project. Even though the narratives were not "full of positive imagery", the process reflected the "generative power" of AI (p.1594). They summarized four types of appreciation at different stages of CAP:

- Discover—appreciation as respecting the value of deconstructive forms of inquiry
- Dream—appreciation as respecting the value of constructive forms of inquiry
- Design—appreciation as valuing critical acts that map out possibilities

 Destiny/Deliver—appreciation as valuing the power to act in a way that creates and embeds new narratives

Applying CAP in program evaluation challenges evaluators and program stakeholders to engage in a collaborative reflective process that reaches beyond technical or descriptive reflection. The process opens up the potential for dialogic discussions that may surface competing priorities, conflicting assumptions, and facilitate the generation of innovative alternatives.

# Methodology

We, the project director and two evaluators of a grant-funded teacher preparation project, engaged in CAP in summer 2020 as the program faced critical decisions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Applying CAP as a dialogic and generative inquiry process, we documented our collective reflections using the self-study approach (Samaras, 2011) and reported on the generative outcomes of the process that led to specific program and evaluation actions.

# **Project Context**

evaluation centers on а teacher preparation project entitled Engaging and Community-Centered Advancing Development (EnACTeD). Project EnACTeD is a five-year project funded by the National Professional Development grant through the U.S. Department of Education to prepare teachers for K-12 English learners (ELs) and dual language learners (DLLs). Project EnACTeD builds upon partnerships between the university teacher preparation program and two local school districts with large percentages of ELs. Through the partnerships, EnACTeD aims at preparing both preservice and inservice teachers to work effectively with ELs, DLLs, and their families through online professional development, university-based teacher preparation programs, and family engagement activities. Project EnACTeD had its planning year in 2017-2018 and had completed two years of implementation by summer 2020.

The evaluation of Project EnACTeD has been carried out by an evaluation team including two evaluators (internal external) as well as two graduate assistants. All evaluation data collection has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the university. The evaluation plan was designed based on culturally responsive, collaborative, and use-focused evaluation approaches and theory (Chouinard & Cram, 2019; Cousins, 2019; Cousins, et al., 2013; Patton, 2012). Evaluation reports were provided to the program team to support ongoing program improvement as well as report program progress in terms of the specific Government Performance and Results Act measures established by the U.S. Department of Education.

# Self-Study Methodology

We applied self-study methodology to guide data collection and analysis in this study. Self-study builds upon Schön's (1983) notions of framing and reframing and is characterized by reframing, collaboration, and openness (Barnes, 1998). Focusing on teacher research, Samaras (2011) elaborates that self-study

requires collaboration and a disposition to openness so that the researcher can present a frame, perhaps an unconscious one; dialogue with critical friends about that frame; and reframe or change his or her way of looking at what is occurring in the classroom and take steps to enact new pedagogies (p. 68).

The self-study methodology entails five key components: a) personal situated inquiry; b) critical collaborative inquiry; c) improved learning; d) transparent research process; and e) knowledge generation and presentation (Barnes, 1998; LaBoskey, 2004; Loughran & Northfield, 1998; Samaras, 2011). Applying self-study methodology in this study, we focused on a self-initiated inquiry based on our collaborative interest in the evaluation of the teacher preparation program; engaged in a critical collaborative inquiry process based on questioned the taken-for-granted assumptions as we continued to seek program improvement; documented our research process through dialogues and critiques; and

contributed to the broad knowledge base across disciplines through our report of findings and lessons learned.

Through the self-study process, research validity is achieved through crystallization (Richardson, 2000), where crystals "are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, and arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends upon our angle of repose" (p.934). Critical friend discussions serve as the prism effect in this study (Samaras, 2011). We deliberately engaged in critical friend discussions to challenge one

another's perspectives and questioned our own assumptions throughout the data collection and analysis process.

# Data Collection and Analysis

The primary data source included individual written reflections and group critical friend discussions guided by CAP. Specific reflection questions were developed collectively through this process (see Table 1).

Table 1
Critical Appreciative Process:
Reflection and Discussion Questions

| Critical Appreciative Process  | Questions   |  |
|--|---|--|
| Discover—appreciation as respecting the value of deconstructive forms of inquiry | <ul> <li>What were theories and assumptions that guided the project design, evaluation design, and the interpretation of evaluation data?</li> <li>What might have been competing priorities that led to compromises in the project and evaluation design and implementation?</li> <li>What were the most provocative and/or impactful experiences</li> </ul> |  |
|  | with the project and evaluation?  |  |
| Dream—appreciation as respecting the value of constructive forms of inquiry      | What would the ideal project-evaluation process be like from<br>different stakeholders' perspectives?   |  |
|  | How would project stakeholders and evaluators collaborate for<br>project improvement?   |  |
|  | How could data be produced, used, and disseminated to<br>maximize the provocative/impactful experiences for all project<br>stakeholders?  |  |
| Design—appreciation as valuing critical acts that map out possibilities          | How would data production, use, and dissemination be<br>redefined?  |  |
|  | What are alternatives to the existing design and implementation routines?   |  |
|  | How could alternatives be integrated in the existing routines and<br>practices to challenge existing practices and promote change?  |  |
|  | How would the project director, evaluator, evaluation team,<br>program participant interact with one another?   |  |

Destiny/Deliver—appreciation as valuing the power to act in a way that creates and embeds new narratives

- What are anticipated challenges when implementing the revised project-evaluation process?
- What strategies need to be employed and resources leveraged to sustain the critical reflections during implementation?
- How could all stakeholders contribute to the ongoing coconstruction of the project-evaluation design and implementation?

At each phase of CAP, both the project director and the primary evaluator first independently reviewed and reflected on the evaluation and project process, design, data collected, and evaluation findings reported to document their individual reflections. These individual reflections were documented in written format using Google Doc. Then, the project director, the evaluator, and a graduate assistant engaged in five discussion sessions to share diverse perspectives, challenge one another to clarify our assumptions and positionalities, and generate ideas insights to lead to collective action. Each discussion session was 90-minutes in length and all sessions were audio-recorded. After each session, edits, comments, and questions were added to the shared Google Doc to extend the collaborative reflection.

Using a self-study approach based on both individual reflections and critical friend discussions (LaBoskey, 2004; Samaras, 2011), both the reflections and discussion notes were analyzed to identify convergent and divergent perspectives shared throughout the CAP process and to highlight implications for both the evaluation and the program. This reflective process led to the re-design of the evaluation plan in Year 4 of the program.

# Reflective Process and Reflective Actions

In this section, we describe the dialogic and generative reflective process following the 4-D CAP model: *Discover*, *Dream*, *Design*, and *Deliver*. At each stage, we share convergent and divergent perspectives from both the project director and the evaluators. In addition, we highlight reflective actions generated as a result of the dialogic reflection.

#### Discover

During the *Discover* phase, the project director and evaluators reflected on their theoretical perspectives, experiences, as well as evaluation data from the two-years of project implementation. The individual reflections and discussion of competing priorities and provocative experiences generated insights for the team to set priorities and identify strengths.

Based on both the project director's and primary evaluators' reflections on their theoretical perspectives and experiences, it was clear that both share the social constructivist outlook and value reflective practices. The project director, for example, cited social constructivist theories as one of the major frameworks that guide her work in teacher education and shared her experiences using reflective practices in teacher education. The program evaluator indicated that her primary motivation as an evaluator is to "engage in reflective practice and evaluative thinking, opening [stakeholders'] minds to diverse perspectives and strategies for knowing". In addition, both of them also share methodological preferences and use mixed methods research designs and strategies in their work. The project director has led several mixed methods research studies and teaches the mixed methods design course at the university, while the program evaluator considers herself a reflective pragmatist and is trained to integrate qualitative quantitative data in program evaluation as necessary to meet the needs of the project.

Through dialogues and reflections, several key competing priorities related to the evaluation of project EnACTeD were identified, including stakeholder and design priorities, impact measures, evaluator role, and the use of evaluation reports (see Table 2). While the

current context and shifts in educational practices present challenges to carrying out the previous evaluation plan (e.g., due to the lack of standardized test data), opportunities were revealed for the project team to engage a wider range of stakeholders in project and evaluation co-design.

Table 2
Competing Priorities

|                    | External Priorities   | Project Team Priorities   |
|--------------------|---|---|
| Stakeholders       | Up-stream stakeholders—funding agencies and institution decision makers   | Down-stream stakeholders—participating teachers, their students, community partners, etc.   |
| Design Priorities  | Rigor and Replicability—e.g., the use of experimental or quasi-experimental design in evaluation to meet What Works ClearingHouse standards; random probability sampling; control of confounding variables; scalable intervention that is implemented with fidelity | Relevance—e.g., the use of localized feedback to support program improvement; purposeful sampling; exploration of needs in unique contexts or outliers; context-specific implementation that may not be generalizable                                     |
| Impact<br>Measures | Immediate impact measured by the numbers of teachers trained and families reached Long-term impact measured by standardized test results, graduation, retention rates, and student attendance   | Immediate impact on teacher motivation, disposition, relationship with families and communities, and families' perceptions and attitudes towards schooling  Long-term impact may include student holistic growth, teacher and community overall wellbeing |
| Evaluator Role     | Objective evaluator—evaluator as a neutral or objective party who provides technical expertise  | Critical friend—evaluator as a critical friend and a thought partner  |
| Evaluation Use     | Accountability—evaluation report that accurately documents program outcomes by numbers to ensure accountability   | Program improvement—evaluation reporting that supports program continuous improvement   |

When discussing provocative and impactful experiences, program personnel expertise, stakeholder collaborations, and community-engaged practices, the evaluators noted the human and social capital of the program implementation team and the advisory board in terms of their individual expertise and collective endeavors toward program operations and improvement. In addition to the university-based teacher

preparation team and partner school district leaders, EnACTeD extended collaborations with the state Department of Public Instruction, other local Institutions of Higher Education, and various community partners that support ELs, DLLs and their families through community-based programs. University-school-community collaborative events celebrating multilingual education that involved teachers, families and children were

highlighted as one of the most impactful experiences. The collaborative, dialogical nature of these events and activities was evident, though none of them were initially specified in the original proposal. The review of the program participant data over the last two years revealed the extensive impact of the program across the state beyond the original two partner school districts.

#### Dream

During the *Dream* phase, the project director and evaluators envisioned an ideal collaborative process for the project and the accompanying evaluation efforts. The engagement of all stakeholders and the integration of evaluation data collection and analysis as part of the program effort emerged as shared priorities.

The project director and the primary evaluator reflected on the evaluation reporting from previous years and insights gained from participating in project team meetings and interactions with various project stakeholders. It was clear that both the project team and the evaluation team were interested in and committed to furthering the engagement with key stakeholders. To enhance the use of formative evaluation to support project design improvement, the importance of timely member checking and reporting discussed. The evaluation team and project director strategized to ensure timely member checking with various stakeholders and provide reporting updates at the monthly project team meetings. As a part of the evaluation process, the evaluation team further reflected **EnACTeD** on how stakeholders, including ELs, DLLs, families, preservice teachers, inservice teachers, and teacher educators should be brought into the regular communication of EnACTeD efforts in their communities, and be provided with various opportunities to offer suggestions and feedback, especially given the challenging teaching and learning contexts uncertainties as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The project team and the advisory team need to be aware of challenges, concerns, innovative and effective practices in order to make program decisions.

Reflection at this stage made it salient that the timely sharing of evaluation outputs with a wide range of stakeholders requires the evaluation team and project team to work collaboratively in evaluation data collection, analysis, and dissemination. Instead of operating as two parallel strands of the same project, the project team and evaluation team need to cross the boundaries of traditionally defined roles. Project team members with research expertise and interest may actively pursue research agendas that provide input for program evaluation purposes. At the same time, the evaluation team may offer research support in documenting the impact of innovative and effective practices in teacher education, K-12, and community settings.

### Design

With the project strengths, competing priorities, and impactful experiences in mind and the shared aspiration to engage all stakeholders in an integrated project-evaluation collaboration design in Year 4, the project director and evaluators engaged in dialogue regarding the larger project context as they explored the re-design of data production, use, and dissemination routines.

It was recognized that the COVID-19 pandemic brought forward some of the persistent challenges facing ELs, DLLs, emergent bilinguals, culturally linguistically diverse (CLD) communities, and teachers working with CLD students and families. For example, there is a clear disparity in terms of students' access to schools through remote learning. CLD students particularly impacted due to the lack of digital access in general and the lack of access to targeted learning materials to support their language development and content learning (Arias, 2020). With districts and schools facing uncertainties in terms of instructional formats, traditional teacher preparation efforts through school-based internships and student teaching are also in limbo. The unprecedented context calls for collaborative inquiries into educational innovations and changes that cannot simply rely on the use of existing research and "best practices." EnACTeD was designed as a community-engaged teacher preparation model that bridges research and

practice (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013; Henrick et. al., 2017). There had always been the intentional practice of inviting students' and families' input to enhance K-12 EL/DL programs, family engagement efforts, and teacher preparation programs. However, the traditional engagement model and the data production, use, and dissemination plan designed for the project may no longer fit the current context. In addition to generating feedback loops to support program improvement, the current context calls for rapid innovations rooted in collaborative design.

The project director and the evaluators agreed that the context required the team to pause to reflect on planned activities for Year 4 to re-align project strengths and priorities when designing program and evaluation activities. Table 3 highlights the key strengths identified through the Discover phase including 1) existing data based on successful implementation of the project; 2) communityengaged research practice partnership design of the project; 3) growing impact of the project; and 4) extensive collaborations with other educational agencies and community partners. The competing priorities surfaced through the *Discover* phase (Table 2), the aspired priorities shared during the *Dream* phase, as well as the current context allowed the team to set balanced priorities in Year 4 to consider stakeholders, impact measures, and the use of evaluation reporting. Both the strengths and priorities led to five design elements in Year 4 for the team to engage in outcome data exploration, needs assessment, completer follow-up study, project information dissemination efforts, and the documentation of implementation for project sustainability.

Instead of serving as neutral observers of the project, the evaluation team plans to further integrate and collaborate with the project team by working closely for evaluation and research design, data collection, and analysis. Project team members plan to integrate data collection, analysis, and dissemination into project day-to-day activities, while the evaluation team plans to serve as "critical friends" to foster "evaluation as learning" (Preskill, 2008; Rallis & Rossman, 2000).

Table 3
Evaluation Design for Year 4

| Strengths and Impact   | Priorities  | Design Elements  |
|--|---|--|
| Existing teacher and student outcome data from two years of implementation         | Explore teacher and student outcome data to disseminate program data for ongoing feedback from stakeholders | Outcome data exploration— explore existing data to identify trends and patterns to guide further data collection and analysis  |
| Community-engaged research practice partnership                                    | Engage key stakeholders in co-<br>design and implementation   | Needs assessment—individual and group interviews with stakeholder groups   |
| Growing project impact beyond the university and partner school districts          | Examine outcome and impact of<br>the program beyond the use of<br>traditional measures                      | Completer follow-up—interviews<br>and artifact collection from<br>completers   |
| Collaborations with local and regional educational agencies and community partners | Identify, study, and share innovative practices and teaching resources in collaboration with other agencies | Information dissemination—share practices and resources in accessible format through newsletters, websites, social media, etc. |
| Existing project routines and tools (e.g., regular project team                    | Document decision making throughout the implementation  | Documentation of implementation for sustainability—collaborative   |

meetings; project team discussions and engagement with partner schools)

process for sustainability of project efforts beyond grant period

meeting notes and ongoing summaries of project decision making

#### Deliver

During the *Deliver* stage, the project director and evaluators reviewed the draft evaluation plan to discuss anticipated challenges given the project context. In addition, strategies that could be employed and resources leveraged to sustain critical reflections throughout the Year implementation and to engage stakeholders in co-design for program improvement and evaluation efforts were shared. One of the major challenges was related to uncertainties in educational contexts as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The project team and evaluators expressed their preparedness to remain flexible and eclectic to carry out any planned activities focusing on shared priorities. The team expressed commitment to collaborating with various stakeholders as decisions are made for specific data collection, analysis, and reporting. Most importantly, committed to collaborating together and crossing boundaries between the project and evaluation activities. This meant integrating the evaluation team more in order to increase their contextual understanding of practices in K-12 education and teacher preparation programs through the needs assessment and completer follow-up study. At the same time, it meant that the project team would commit to learning more about the evaluation efforts, and processes, through participation in the outcome data exploration and information dissemination efforts.

Reviewing human, financial, organizational, and community resources of the program, the project director and updated routines, evaluators project procedures, and protocols for the Year 4 program and evaluation planning together. Recognizing potential blocks to authentic reflection during implementation, reflective space has been thoughtfully integrated throughout the project and evaluation meetings for dialogic reflection in order to guide more reflective, learning-centered

actions for improvement of both the project and the evaluation.

#### Lessons Learned

Building upon the reflective practice traditions in both program evaluation and teacher education, in this article, we documented the process and outcomes of CAP as a dialogic and generative reflective process. While process and outcomes may reflect the unique experiences and backgrounds of the project director and evaluators involved in this process and are specific to the funded project, the application of CAP in the evaluation process is not idiosyncratic. Based on our shared experiences, we identified three specific lessons learned that may have implications for evaluators who are exploring ways to engage in collaborative reflective processes with project teams.

First, the dialogic reflective process entails reflexivity and requires pausing. As Patel (2015) emphasized in her book Decolonizing Educational Research, when scholars attempt to map possible futurities, they "do so with a reckoning of the past trajectories that give shape to the present realities" through pausing and learning (p.95). This "pedagogy of pausing" requires practitioners to critically examine and suspend their premises to engage in learning and undoing before marching towards productions (Smith & Skolits, in press; Tuck, 2015). Reviewing relevant literature focusing on reflective practice in higher education, Ganly (2018) also proposed pausing as one of the initial steps in the PARA (pausing, attending, revising, adopting, and adapting) model to achieve the transformational potential of the reflective practice.

When engaging in a program improvement process, it is often tempting to either focus only on the analysis of selected program conditions (such as the analysis of program strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) and outputs, or rush into plans of action. Starting with the *Discover* phase, CAP engages practitioners in the practice of critical

reflexivity and allows time and space for pausing. Even though CAP is a cyclical rather than linear process, we benefited from the intentional pausing, reflexive journaling, and time we allotted for dialogic reflections during the Discover and Dream phases prior to moving into the Design and Deliver phases to plan and carry out actions. purposeful attention to taken-for-granted assumptions, the desired social impact, and the competing priorities, dialogue regarding plans for program improvement may neglect practitioners' diverse perspectives, different social backgrounds, power, or social location (Poland et al., 2006; van Draanen, 2017). Instead of merely focusing on seeking solutions to fulfill pre-planned evaluation processes that are challenged by the changing context, pausing to refocus on desired program impact and imagine "what is to become" would allow program stakeholders and evaluators to be guided and motivated by their passion, values, and visions (Gergen, 2014, p. 294).

Further, reflective practice in program evaluation situates our dialogues as learning rather than an accountability discussion. Considering upstream stakeholders, external funders, and various program accountability measures that need to be taken into consideration in evaluation reporting, it is inevitable that evaluators are charged to collect, analyze, and report data that indicate the degree to which programs implement their proposed plans with fidelity and achieve their stated objectives. However, if plans and objectives are viewed as static components. practitioners will never be able to adapt to the changing context and truly achieve the desired outcomes for the intended program participants. The COVID-19 pandemic clearly illustrated the need of program adaptation in educational contexts. The infusion of the learning mindset through our dialogic reflection allowed us to focus our discussion on ways of learning and appreciating divergent perspectives that led to more productive codesign and delivery when facing challenges and uncertainties. For project EnACTeD, the inclusion of a second round of needs assessment as part of the Year 4 evaluation plan is an immediate output of our reflection and will allow us to further integrate learning throughout the program implementation for sustainability.

Finally, reflective action can create a dialogic and generative virtuous cycle (Orlem, Binkert, & Clancy, 2007). As Archibald et al. (2018) proposed, it is important for evaluators to consider critical reflective practice at macro, meso, micro, and meta levels. This requires us to enact evaluative thinking in-the-moment (micro), grow our self-awareness and expertise (meso), consider our roles and responsibilities in society broadly (macro), and be able to reflect on our actions associated with the other three levels of reflection (meta). To maximize the use of the evaluation process and outcomes for program improvement, it is also critical for evaluators to carry out this duality of reflection and action through collaborative engagement with stakeholders (Smith et al., 2015; Smith & Skolits, in press). With different expertise. backgrounds, and priorities, evaluators and project stakeholders may benefit from the sharing of divergent perspectives to embark on a collective inquiry process. This process promotes intersection of program and evaluation activities, which may lead to the cultivation of evaluative thinking among the project stakeholders as the potential generative impact (Archibald et al., 2018). intentional incorporation of dialogic and generative reflection into program evaluation processes creates a virtuous cycle where evaluative feedback is no longer perceived as external or unidirectional. Instead, evaluators and program stakeholders can engage in a virtuous cycle of inquiry process for continuous program improvement.

#### Conclusion

The use of reflective practices in evaluation is an invitation to discover what is possible in integrating the learning process more intentionally in program improvement efforts. Given that reflective practice has been integrated across various professional practices, it seems to be natural to build upon the traditions across different disciplinary areas when applying reflective practice in program evaluation practices.

In this article, we reviewed reflective practice traditions in both program evaluation

and teacher education and illustrated how the critical appreciative process can be employed to engage the project director and evaluators in dialogic and generative reflection. The example illustrated how the process supported the shift of evaluation efforts to be more collaborative, integrated, and responsive to the current program context. The dialogic nature of the process allowed for critical insights, divergent perspectives, and negotiation of priorities. These reflective dialogues provided the project director and the evaluators with the space to truly pause, resulting in an integrated perspective and direction that would not have been achieved without such The engagement. generative outcomes documented indicate the potential impact of reflective practice in program evaluation beyond merely enhancing evaluators' reflexivity.

Even though the importance of reflective practice has been widely recognized in the field of evaluation, there is still a paucity of literature documenting intentional reflective Future research to practices. articulate ways such dialogic and generative reflective processes may be integrated across disciplinary could areas additional insights for evaluation professionals.

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