Meaningful Assessment Promotes Meaningful Learning

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Abstract
Since the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, America's schools have faced enhanced scrutiny by the public sector. Larger demands have been placed on children to perform at increasingly higher levels of achievement in reading and math, often beginning as early as kindergarten. Teachers and institutions of higher education have also felt the surge of outside pressure to "perform" wash over them.

Keywords
assessment, testing

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This article is available in Wisdom in Education: http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/wie/vol2/iss1/12
Since the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, America’s schools have faced enhanced scrutiny by the public sector. Larger demands have been placed on children to perform at increasingly higher levels of achievement in reading and math, often beginning as early as kindergarten. Teachers and institutions of higher education have also felt the surge of outside pressure to “perform” wash over them.

By the 1970’s, many areas of the curriculum had been distilled down to a series of discreet skills and competency standards. These skills were both hierarchical and sequential, thus making them easy to define, and even easier to test for mastery (Allington, 1995). In the past thirty-five years, assessment has become a mainstay of the K-12 classroom. Students are assessed using both formal and informal assessments on a weekly, and sometimes daily, basis. While in years past teachers often created their own assessments based on the content being taught in their classrooms, schools have more recently entered the era of standardized achievement testing. Tests are no longer teacher-made, but instead are standardized and mandated at the national, state, district, and school levels. Testing is no longer just a teacher and student issue, rather testing has become a political obsession.

It is difficult to open a newspaper or watch the evening news without the topic of academic achievement, test scores, and teacher accountability being bandied about. Both local and national politicians have made educational accountability a campaign issue as evidenced by the signing of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) by President George W. Bush in 2001. This historic law set a new precedent by enacting the first-ever testing mandate for all students in grades 3-8 attending school in the United States. NCLB requires schools to adopt a standardized achievement test that covers both reading and mathematics and is administered on a yearly basis. Test scores must be made public by individual schools and school districts. The scores must then be disaggregated based on gender, socioeconomic status, English proficiency status, migrant status, racial and ethnic group membership, and for students with disabilities identified within the schools’ student population. While the states have the freedom to develop their own benchmarks or standards in reading and mathematics, and to select or develop their own standardized assessment system, the results of the tests must reflect whether the students, and in turn the schools, are making adequate yearly progress (AYP). Those schools who do not achieve the standards set forth by the state risk being labeled as
“failing schools” which may impact their ability to receive federal educational funding (Stiggins, 2005).

The present political-educational climate has created what I describe as the culture of testing. This construct refers to an increased focus on standardized testing and test scores, the arbitrary creation of multilayered grade level standards across the curriculum, and a decreased emphasis on meaningful, authentic and student-centered learning. The advent of the culture of testing set into motion by the NCLB Act has impacted schools, teachers and students in several less than ideal ways. Popham (2001) describes these unintended outcomes as follows: a) misdirected pressures on educators, b) misidentification of inferior and superior schools, c) curricular reductionism, d) drill and kill instructional techniques, and e) test-pressured cheating (pp. 16-23). While Popham is not against the use of standardized testing as one method of gathering information on a student’s progress, he believes that the results are often misused and misrepresented by those outside the classroom. This has led to many negative and unfair educational consequences for teachers and students.

So… within our present culture of testing, how can we open a dialogue as to the value of creating a meaningful assessment system that promotes meaningful learning within the classroom? I believe the answer lies in the research on teaching and learning. For decades, educators and psychologists have been studying the cognitive development of children, beginning at birth and extending into adulthood. Emerging from this body of literature is research on the collaborative nature of instruction and assessment. When we understand this relationship, it becomes clear how and why we should and should not assess learners. To begin with, let’s focus on the how’s and why’s of assessment.

Why assess students throughout the learning process? How does continuous, authentic assessment promote meaningful learning?

Wiggins (1998) begins to address the aims of assessment when he describes educative assessment as follows:

“An educative assessment system is designed to teach—to improve performance (of student and teacher) and evoke exemplary pedagogy. It is built on the bedrock of meaningful performance tasks that are credible and realistic (authentic), hence engaging to students” (p.12).

It should be noted that an educative assessment system includes both the teacher and the learner as active participants in the assessment process thereby making it a collaborative effort that is used to support meaningful teaching and learning within the classroom. Additionally Wiggins distinguishes educative assessment as a “system” rather than a series of disconnected tests and assignments that lie outside the realm of instruction. By incorporating such a system of assessment into the curriculum, the act of assessing a student becomes integral to the act of teaching a student. Together teaching, learning and assessing are co-mingled throughout the
instructional day, allowing both teachers and students to continually monitor and reflect upon their understandings. It is this process of collaborative-reflective learning that serves as the basis for *scaffolded instruction*. The diagram presented in Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the recursive nature of scaffolded instruction.

In order to create a learning environment supportive of scaffolded instruction, all of the components depicted in Figure 1 must be present during the instructional process. Initially when a new concept or skill is introduced, the teachers accept full responsibility for instruction. Instruction at this stage therefore involves modeling, demonstrations, mini lessons, and other forms of teacher-initiated and controlled lessons. As the learners begin to understand and internalize the skill or concept, teachers gradually release the responsibility for learning, eventually completely placing it into the hands of the learners. During the process of releasing responsibility, teachers continually assess the learners’ level of understanding, only letting go of this responsibility when deemed appropriate.

Though Figure 1 depicts the structure of a scaffolded learning experience as linear, it is imperative to realize that it is a dynamic process within an ever-changing situational context. Teachers may return learners to the area of guided practice or modeling if the teachers feel that the learners are experiencing difficulty with a specific skill or concept. The scaffolded learning environment is designed to be flexible, enabling teachers to target the learners’ specific needs. Ultimately the goal in any scaffolded learning experience is for learners to internalize the knowledge being taught and then transfer it to a new learning situation, thus accepting full responsibility for their own learning (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976).

Beed, Hawkins and Roller (1991) found that the levels of instructional support provided by teachers widely vary at different stages of the scaffolding process. Complete modeling of a task with detailed descriptions of the elements involved demonstrate a high level of teacher support; whereas, teachers’ clues and hints show a lower level of teacher support.

Beed, et al., (1991) contend that scaffolding of instruction exists along a continuum ranging from a high level of teacher support to a low level of teacher support. Falling between these two extremes are the stages of assisted modeling, element identification, and strategy naming. Assisted modeling involves the modeling of a task by teachers who then invite the learners to participate in the task. Element identification occurs when the learners begin the task on their own and teachers verbalize the necessary elements of successful task completion as the learners work on the task. Strategy naming requires much less involvement on the part of teachers. Here teachers simply name a strategy and ask the learners to perform a task utilizing the specific strategy. Each level of scaffolded support identified above is compatible with Vygotsky’s (1962, 1978) Sociocultural Approach to Cognitive Development because the teacher is providing the learners with varying levels of mediated activity.
Gaskins, Rauch, Gensemer, Cunicelli, O’Hara, Six, and Scott (1997) have developed a concise definition of scaffolding that nicely brings together the ideas put forth by the authors cited above. In summary, scaffolding means “explaining, demonstrating, and jointly constructing an idealized version of performance. Scaffolding recruits the student’s interest, reducing the number of steps so the task is manageable, maintaining students’ persistence toward the goal, making critical features evident, and controlling frustration and risk” (p. 47). Therefore teachers and learners are able to control the pacing of a lesson to allow for individual needs, learning styles, and interests thus making it a very personal, meaningful and powerful form of instruction.

Conclusions
In its present form, the over reliance on standardized testing as the main form of teacher and student accountability is flawed and detrimental to all members of the learning community. With this being said, it becomes imperative for educators to have a voice in educational decisions being made at various levels of government which then trickles down to inform educational practice in schools. Popham (2001) believes, “that one of the chief reasons that educators passively suffer the increasingly serious set of test-induced difficulties in their classrooms is that, by and large, the educational community is woefully ignorant about measurement” (p. 26). He refers to this phenomenon as *assessment illiteracy*. It is this lack of understanding about measurement that has allowed teachers to passively accept the mandated standardized assessment procedures with little resistance, even though they have proven to be detrimental to their students. By becoming informed consumers of assessments, teachers will be able to more confidently voice their concerns to parents and legislators within their communities and have a significant impact on educational policy. It will also allow teachers to provide students with authentic, meaning-based alternative assessments that will enhance learning rather than detract from the learning process. Though this may seem intimidating to many teachers, it is essential for teachers to become proactive and educate the public regarding learning theory and meaningful assessment. Teachers are the experts in the field of education and by understanding and promoting meaningful, scaffolded instruction and assessment they can affect positive changes within our present culture of testing.

References


