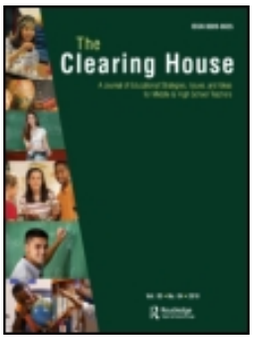

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A Teacher's Guide to Alternative Assessment

Taking the First Steps

CAROL A. CORCORAN, ELIZABETH L. DERSHIMER, and MERCEDES S. TICHENOR

In a fifth grade classroom, students are bent over their graphic calculators rapidly writing observations while the teacher watches. The task is to hypothesize at what point and why the graph flattens as they grasp the calculator's probe with their hand. These children are learning by experimenting with the material to be learned. When it is time to assess these and other skills learned during the unit, the teacher could assess using traditional paper and pencil tests. Instead, the teacher chooses an alternative technique. The students are called individually to eight different stations where they meet with junior interns who have worked with the students throughout the semester. The interns then assess the students in an alternative fashion. For example, three small cars are set on incline planes covered by different surface materials. The student predicts which car will complete the run first and why. Then the student releases the cars down the incline planes to confirm the prediction. The student relates the law of motion that applies to the car demonstration. The intern (which also could be a parent helper, teaching assistant, or even the teacher) uses a rubric with prepared questions to discuss each concept with the student. This type of assessment allows the assessor to determine the depth of student understanding. It also allows students who do know the concept but perhaps struggle with reading or writing to demonstrate their science knowledge.

Classroom-based assessment is the collection and evaluation of evidence of student learning, focusing on indicators of meaningful and valuable student progress (Shepard 1989; Valencia 1990; Farr 1992). This type of assessment includes alternative forms of testing, such as performance tasks, which allow students to communicate or display mastery in different forms. According to Herman, Aschbacher, and Winters (1992), common characteristics for such assessments include (1) asking students to perform, create, produce, or do something; (2) tapping higher-level thinking and problem-solving skills; (3) using tasks that represent meaningful instructional activities; (4) involving real world applications; and (5) using human judgment to do the scoring.

Herman (1992) contends that effective student assessment is grounded in theories of learning and cognition and builds on the skills students need to be successful in the future. Moreover, a quality assessment program uses classroom-based data to inform teaching and to help students become more self-monitoring and self-regulating (Daniels and Bizar 1998). Both students and teachers must continuously take risks and evaluate themselves, and teachers must always develop new instructional assessment roles (Routman 1991; Herman, Aschbacher, and Winters 1992).

Although many educators agree on the importance of using a variety of authentic assessment techniques in the classroom, implementing them is difficult. In other words, many teachers may be unsure of how to combine quality assessment with daily practice. In this article, we describe an assessment ladder that provides a framework for classroom teachers to reflect on their use of traditional versus alternative, or authentic, assessment techniques. Furthermore, we provide suggestions on how teachers can progress up the assessment ladder to incorporate more authentic ways of assessing student learning in their classrooms.

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The Assessment Ladder

Developing willingness and the ability to use alternative assessment is a step-by-step process. We compare this process to climbing up a ladder. Teachers take hold of the ladder when, although they currently are not using alternative assessments, they express a desire to explore their uses. As teachers climb toward full implementation of alternative assessment practices, they pass through three levels on this ladder. Table 1 provides sample strategies for each level of the assessment ladder as described in the following sections.

First Steps: Level I

The teacher who uses one or two alternative assessment strategies as a summative measure (grade book) at least once each grading period is on Level I. At this level, the most commonly used assessments are rubrics, portfolios, and checklists. These types of assessment are often used in kindergarten or early primary grades. Their use decreases proportionally as students move to the middle grades (Trepanier-Street, McNair, and Donegan 2001). In other words, as students become more competent readers and writers, the assessment strategies often reflect only paper and pencil tasks. However, authentic assessment techniques are effective with all students, even those with weaker writing skills. For example, teachers can use checklists during observations to determine if students complete certain processes or display particular behaviors. Teachers can also use rubrics to evaluate student writing samples or math problems (Kuhs et al. 2001).

Moving Up: Level II

At this level, the teacher uses Level I measures more than once during a grading period. The teacher begins to try a variety of alternative assessments during the grading period and is willing to allow several of the formative assessment strategies to serve as summative measures. Journal entries, especially if the entry information is tied to teaching and learning objectives, give the teacher insight into students' cognitive progress and reveal their attitudes toward content. Journal entries are especially helpful in assessing disjunctive concepts, such as rights and responsibilities. For example, an open-ended journal response to the following hypothetical situation can help a teacher assess the student's grasp of these concepts: "We have been studying our free speech rights in class. James is running for 7th grade class president and you are helping him write a campaign speech. Give him some advice about his rights and responsibilities as he prepares his speech."

Another formative assessment tool that can be used as a summative measure is the "I learned . . ." statements that students write at the end of a lesson. The teacher can ask students to list five things they learned from the lesson. As a formative assessment, the teacher can evaluate the major concepts the students learned during the lesson, as well as identify any gaps or alternative understanding in students' learning. "I learned . . ." statements can also be used as a summative evaluation and entered into the grade book as a quiz grade.

Many other alternative or authentic assessment techniques can be used with students who struggle with language. Labeling a map, conducting a science experiment, or illustrating supporting details of a story are but a few crosscurriculum ways middle school students can show what they have learned with minimal writing. Furthermore, illustrated learning is especially helpful for teachers of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students. It allows teachers to evaluate these students' content knowledge without relying solely on their ability to use the target language.

Although interviews are a time consuming alternative assessment strategy, they are well worth considering. Again, this is a strategy that can be used both as a formative or summative assessment. Individual interviews or conferences with a student allow teachers to evaluate the depth of a student's knowledge. Students can be required to assemble supporting documentation in preparation for the conference. This activity increases both critical and creative thinking strategies.

Other formative assessment strategies—such as self-reporting, record keeping, or spot check techniques—are common ways to assess student progress (Ellis 2002). For example, in a mathematics class, the teacher

TABLE 1. Sample Strategies for Various Levels

Level I	Level II	Level III
Rubrics	Journals entries	Self-choice of medium
Portfolios	"I learned" statements	"I can teach"
Checklists	Learning illustrations	
	Self-assessments	

might ask students to critique their progress while working on a measurement project. Self-reporting would give the students the opportunity to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their own work. Such reports might also point out ideas that are unclear. Then the teacher, or possibly other students, can provide additional information and support to refocus the learning. Record keeping, another metacognitive strategy, requires that students keep detailed notes about completed assignments. Each record includes the date, assignment, grade, summary notes, and so on. Both of these strategies assess learning during instruction and help students progress in their understanding of their own thinking. Students may also participate in self-evaluation through activity checklists. Checklists help develop student ownership of and responsibility for assignments. The teachers can then turn the checklists into grade sheets. Grade sheets may be weighted differently, and the final grades depend on a total number of points earned by the student. These techniques can provide a much more accurate picture of the knowledge and skills students have learned than traditional paper and pencil formats.

Nearing the Top: Level III

Educators at this level use Levels I and II strategies on a regular basis in their classrooms and allow flexibility in their standard assessments. For example, the teacher might give students the option of crossing out five of the twenty-five short answer questions on a test and inserting five similar questions about material they learned while studying for the test but was not included on the exam. A willingness to substitute what a student perceives as important in a unit of study is an important indicator that a teacher has progressed to Level III.

One of the most difficult assessment changes for teachers to implement is a willingness to encourage students to choose any medium through which to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of concepts or objectives. For example, if the student learning objective is to describe the process of how a bill becomes a law, the teacher allows the students to choose how they will demonstrate they know this material. In responding to such an assignment, for example, students can develop a rap song and perform it for the class. The rap must touch on all the points the teacher included on a rubric established for alternative assessment presentations. In another example, the learning goal is to demonstrate knowledge of facts, findings, theories, important events, and/or noted scientists studied in life science during this reporting period. Students might decide to develop a game using a Trivial Pursuit format including four categories in the life sciences. Alternative demonstrations of content mastery can result in Jeopardy-like games, vocabulary and concepts incorporated in a video play, a collage, or book reports.

The "I can teach" strategy also is an excellent alternative assessment strategy for middle school students. Using this strategy, the teacher assigns an individual student or a small group of students a topic or teaching objective. They must research and organize the information in preparation to teach the class (Ellis 2002). The teacher offers guidance and a rubric throughout the process.

Teachers who include alternative assessments in their teaching are rewarded with creative student projects that honor a range of intelligences. In addition, students are more enthusiastic about course content and more willing to actively participate in assessing their own learning. Middle school students, in particular, are at the developmental age where they can think both critically and creatively. These students like to work in groups and want to be considered in control of their lives. Encouraging Level III assessments gives these students opportunities to make choices and demonstrate that control.

Teachers who are at Level III continue to experiment with ways to assess what their students know and are able to do. They continue to expand their knowledge of alternative assessment strategies and are willing to help other teachers climb the alternative assessment ladder to make their classroom environments places where students succeed.

Conclusion

Where are you on the assessment ladder? Are you taking your first steps, beginning the climb, or nearing the top? Where do you want to be? As you begin thinking about climbing the ladder, it is important to remember that authentic assessment is integral to the teaching process. It must be continually incorporated into lesson planning. Although many teachers are creative in planning learning activities, they forget to be creative in their assessment of learning. Through integrating teaching and assessment, teachers give children opportunities to demonstrate their learning in more authentic and realistic ways. For example, when one student asks another student to more forward on the teeter-totter—shouting, "Move up, you're heavier and I need to be further from the fulcrum than you. Remember in science when we—" at that point, the teacher has proof that the student fully understands the simple mechanics studied in class.

Table 2 provides a self-check guide for teachers. Educators can use this guide to monitor their progress and focus on opportunities to enrich the repertoire of tools and skills they use to assess student learning. Although taking the first step on the ladder may be overwhelming, uncomfortable, or even scary, it is definitely a step worth taking.

TABLE 2. Self-Check Guide

Putting up the ladder—Ground floor	• I plan interesting hands-on activities for students but still use traditional paper and pencil tasks to assess learning. • I do not use alternative assessments in my classroom. • I am interested in learning about alternative assessment techniques.
First steps—Level I	• I use one or more alternative assessment strategies as a summative measure at least once each grading period.
Moving up—Level II	• I use Level I measures in my classroom. • I use a variety of formative assessments at least four times during a grading period. • I use some formative assessment strategies in a summative format.
Nearing the top—Level III	• I use the measures listed in Levels I and II. • I encourage students to choose any medium to demonstrate their understanding of concepts and objectives. • I am open to increasing my knowledge of alternative assessment techniques.

Key words: alternative or authentic assessment, evaluation, performance tasks

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