

Why Current Assessment Practices Have Failed To Transform Our Schools

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As accountability for teachers and schools continues to increase, the importance of assessment has grown in equal proportions. Thus, textbook companies have seen new and lucrative business opportunities within the realm of assessment and currently offer schools and districts a myriad of products they claim to be transformational. However, rather than transforming districts, these products have allowed and even encouraged academic performance to either decline or stagnate. For example, a district (which will remain unnamed) in Colorado pays over one million dollars per year for McGraw Hill's Acuity Reading Assessment Program, so one would think that one million dollars would buy some significant results. In 2004, before the program began, this district's average scale score for reading was 639.88 on the state accountability test; in 2010, 638.81. It may be surprising that a district has paid (and continues to pay) so much for so little, but I am not surprised. This is because these assessment methodologies marginalize teachers rather than improve them, and, thus, fail to address the root causes of student underachievement.

The real problem with current attempts to improve schools' and districts' assessment practices can be found in a misunderstanding of the purpose of Understanding by Design, which requires teachers to create final assessments first and then plan their classes backwards from there. The misunderstanding sees the final assessment as the educational experience or the "product" that the district produces. This is unfortunately not the case (things would be so much easier if it were). Assessments, class activities, etc, are actually extensions of the real product schools and districts offer: **THE TEACHER**. When quality teachers create assessments, they create quality assessments. In other words, it is a teacher's understanding of their craft that creates the educational experience for a student; therefore, educational leaders seeking to create a better product for their students must seek to create better teachers first and foremost. If a teacher cannot understand and assess a desired outcome, they cannot deliver learning activities that will achieve that outcome. But how can we create better teachers by removing them from portions of the teaching process and allowing textbook companies to take on key responsibilities that teachers, in reality, own? What if I allowed my writing students to rely on MSWord grammar tools for their final essays.? Would this make them better writers? In short, our students' achievements depend on the competencies of their teachers. When tools are looked upon to compensate for competency gaps in teachers, rather than filling those gaps, the quality of their work does not improve, it is diminished. We must re-integrate teachers with all of the teaching process, but for the sake of our discussion here, which deals with the practice of assessment, let's focus our attention on a new methodology I'd like to call Integrated Formative Assessment.

Integrated Formative Assessment (IFA) functions on the basic principle is that we as educational leaders cannot influence our teachers to become better by removing them from any part of the teaching processes for which they are responsible, including assessment. Unfortunately, this disengagement with meaningful assessment seems to be all too common today. The goal is to re-engage teachers with the assessment process by incorporating standards-based student assessments into the classroom experience, for which teachers are responsible and upon which students depend most for their academic growth, by allowing them to create their own questions and assessments,

receive significantly more meaningful data from those questions than simply "percentage correct," and use the data to improve their understandings of desired outcomes. It is derived from a "process" view of teaching, not a "functional" view of things, such as assessment, that teachers do. It recognizes that assessment results must serve as critical *inputs* into the teaching process, not simply outputs of an exercise to be used for grading and reporting purposes. When treated as inputs to the teaching process, student assessment information can help teachers respond to the evolving learning priorities of each student with maximum efficiency and impact. Data produced by current assessment practices are adequate for reporting and grading, but "grades" are not why teachers teach, and reports are only useful to the degree to which they measure the quality of the product. Because a district's product is, in reality, the teacher, and the student is, in reality, the consumer, measuring student achievement alone is insufficient for a district or even an individual teacher to be able to engage in the quality management process.

Unique qualities the data itself must possess are these:

- Currency. Teaching, and learning, is a *continuous* process: It occurs on a day-to-day basis. This means that, for a teacher to be responsive to each student's evolving growth, the growth must also be measured continuously.
- Relevance. A high performing student need not repeatedly demonstrate proficiencies that have already been mastered. A low performing student need not attempt to demonstrate proficiencies far beyond his current capabilities. To assess students beyond the bounds of their relevant mastery levels is wasteful, distracting, and does not improve the quality of the assessment data. In addition, relevance of data lies beyond the context of "appropriateness of difficulty". Data must also create student ownership of their progress. This is very difficult when data and assessment occurs outside the classroom experience. IFA integrates the creation of meaningful, standards-based data with the classroom experience, creating both relevant difficulty and content.
- A Position On An Objective Scale: Assessments must yield an indication of a student's position along the performance continuum. In other words, they must be an objective measure of a student's capabilities, not a subjective indicator of how he performs relative to others. They must take into account that perfection is not a growth requirement, and, therefore, percentage correct within a given score range is not a sufficient indicator of a student's true proficiency. For example, perfection at grade level does not necessarily indicate advanced status. Similarly, while inability at grade level does indicate remedial status, the question remains, "How remedial?" However, percentage correct *among* score ranges and grade levels can algorithmically yield this information.
- Quantitatively Valid Within The Classroom Experience: Assessment questions must be valid tests against a recognized standard. A teacher designating a question as a valid test against a given standard does not make it so in reality. However, the validity of a question can be analyzed and validated against historical data, and teachers must have the means to validate the assessments they create and their students take. Lacking an ability to do so leads to illusions of growth, not true growth necessarily, and frustrations from teachers who felt very strongly that they witnessed growth over the course of the school year but did not see the results they were expecting on the high-stakes test. But, in the end, quantitative validity of assessment is enough to positively impact student achievement, for validity is meaningless if the assessment process and the data it produces are not qualitatively useful.

- Qualitatively Useful: Teachers are the “process owners.” They are ultimately responsible for the impact their teaching has on their students. Therefore, they must be able to interpret assessment results so they can correctly respond to them with appropriate resources and learning activities. This inevitably means that teachers must become qualified assessors. Lacking a deep understanding of the standards upon which assessment results are based, teachers are ill equipped to convert the information into appropriate courses of action for their students. This is a subtle but significant requirement. Current technological tools attempt to make teachers better assessors by removing them from the assessment process. While on first glance, these current practices seem “cool” and “time saving”, they fail to address the root cause of student underachievement (teachers matter!), and the evidence of this can be seen through the continuous decline of student achievement in Colorado years after many of these technological tools have been implemented.

In varying degrees, current assessment practices fail to satisfy the “process input” requirements above. In general, this is because standards-based assessment is approached as a “discrete function” that can be automated. Attempts to retro-fit an automated assessment function into the teaching process are often disappointing and costly. Integrated Formative Assessment recognizes that student assessments are innately tied to how a teacher must approach his or her students on a day-to-day basis. IFA confronts the above requirements head on and satisfies them in ways current practices cannot.

There are many aspects to a student's educational experience, but the teacher is the central pillar and the process owner. Good teachers cause students to grow; mediocre teachers do not. And as a child moves forward in his schooling and skills become increasingly abstract, teacher knowledge and ability increases in importance. One cannot make me a better teacher by developing lessons for me. One cannot make me a better assessor by creating assessments for me, just as one cannot make me a better writer by writing essays for me. Engage me in processes that will encourage my growth, and students will grow along with me.