

## Assessment of Learning by William and Ochan Powell

Consider that the traditional purpose of assessment in schools was to sort and rank students. Given the class hierarchies and the stratified job market of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was imperative to have a means of funneling young people into productive employment. In Britain in the 1950's, the Eleven Plus Examination. Taken at the age of eleven, the results of this exam determined whether a child would enter further academic study or be shunted into vocational training. The old British "O" Level Examinations further sorted and ranked students at age 16. The top 10% of candidates, irrespective of their actual performance on the examination, received "A"s and the next 20% "B"s and so on. These so-called norm referenced tests compared students performance against other students sitting the same examination.

Teachers who grew up in norm-referenced systems often find it very difficult to think about assessment without comparing students against each other even within a relatively small classroom.

Another traditional purpose of educational assessment was dole out punishments and rewards. Students who did well received accolades, were placed on the Honor Roll and received awards and prizes. Students who didn't do well were also recognized, sometimes publicly, with scorn and ridicule. In the traditional perception of assessment, fear was seen as a powerful motivator of student achievement. And so one of the strategies used by teachers was to build within the students an urgent sense of assessment anxiety. Stiggins (2002) writes: "We all grew up in classrooms in which our teachers believed that the way to maximize learning was to maximize anxiety and assessment has always been the great intimidator. We still see the legacy of this connection between assessment and anxiety when we assign students a task and their first question is: "Will it be grade? Will it count?"

About thirty years ago, a few educational systems began to focus attention on so-called criterion-referenced assessment. This represented a revolution in thinking about the purpose of assessment and school. In criterion-referenced assessment, a student's achievement is not compared against other

students, but rather the student's work is evaluated against pre-determined achievement criteria.

Criterion-referenced assessment of learning has come to play a central role in the movement towards developing standards-based curriculum. In other words, we determine what we want the students to learn – what we want them to know, understand and be able to do (school-wide standards). We set benchmarks of grade level quality and then we design assessments that allow us to determine the degree to which our student have achieved these standards.

Some of our most important standards are difficult, perhaps even impossible, to assess objectively. For example, we believe that an important learning standard for schools should be the enthusiasm and joy that children are developing for the learning process. This is virtually impossible to measure on a so-called objective assessment. So we are faced with a choice. We can simply not measure it, in which case, it will probably be relegated to the column of desirable but optional standard that may happen by spontaneous combustion; however, in most classrooms it won't be part of the planned curriculum. There is truth to the old adage that what is measured is taught.

### **Another way of looking at Assessment: Assessment for Learning**

"You don't fatten a cow by weighing it."  
--Anonymous

We need to start by asking some very basic question what we do in classroom and why. If the purpose of differentiation is to maximize the learning of all students –to take a high quality curriculum and to provide the maximum access to it for all learners, then we would suggest that any assessment that takes place in the differentiated classroom needs to be aligned to this. To this end, we see two purposes for assessment in the differentiated classroom:

1. to analyze student progress and to determine the status of learning, and

2. to serve as an essential component of the learning process in order to promote and enhance further learning

We distinguish between these functions by talking about assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning. However, it is important to understand that assessment *of* and assessment *for* learning are not mutually exclusive. One does not need to choose between them.

Assessment for learning has a great deal in common with what teachers often refer to as “formative assessment” –assessment strategies that are not included in a student’s grade, but rather serve as a means for teachers to check on student progress and modify instruction if need be. However, there is a crucial difference between what we have customarily thought of as “formative assessment” and assessment for learning.

Assessment *for* learning seeks to promote and enhance learning, not merely to check on it. Assessment *for* learning place the learner at the heart of the assessment process. It is really the role that the student plays in the assessment process that distinguishes assessment for learning and make it so compatible with differentiated instruction.

Principles of Assessment for Learning:

**Principle #1: AfL is part of effective instructional planning.**

Assessment is not an after-thought to see how much of what has been taught has been caught. Like understanding by Design (UbD) (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) assessment for learning is not something that simply happens at the end of the unit or semester.

It is integrated into the instructional process.

**Principle #2: AfL focuses on how students learn (not just “what” they learn).**

The on-going assessment need to provide students with opportunities to reflect on the learning process. This is the meta-cognitive piece in which learner actually think about thinking.

**Principle#3: AfL is central to classroom practice.** We need to think about assessment as something which occurs daily in the classroom, not just something that happen at the end of a chapter, a unit or a semester. Assessment is both a formal and informal process that involves teachers and learners in reflection, dialogue and decision making.

**Principle#4: AfL is a key professional skill.** Assessment is a complex and demanding task. Teachers need to plan for assessment, observe learning, analyze and interpret evidence of learning, give feedback and support learners in self-assessment.

**Principle#5: AfL is sensitive and constructive.** Any form of assessment has an emotional impact on the learner and therefore should be sensitive and constructive. Stiggins (2002) suggests two questions that we might ask ourselves about the feedback we give students and its emotional impact on the learner’s motivation and confidence: “How can we use assessment to help all our students want to learn? And, how can we help them feel able to learn?”

**Principle #6: AfL fosters motivation.** Assessment needs to encourage learners. By encourage, we are not simply referring to praise. Encouragement comes through recognition of personal progress and accomplishment. Therefore the focus of the assessment needs to be on what the learner *has achieved*, not on what he or she will still cannot do.

## Assessment Crisis: The Absence of Assessment FOR Learning by Richard J. Stiggins

If assessments *of learning* provide evidence of achievement for public reporting, then assessments *for learning* serve to help students learn more. The crucial distinction is between assessment to determine the status of learning and assessment to promote greater learning.

Assessments *of* and *for* learning are both important. Since we in the U.S. already have many assessments *of* learning in place [standardized tests, etc], if we are to balance the two, we must make a much stronger investment in assessment *for* learning. We can realize unprecedented gains in achievement if we turn the

current day-to-day classroom assessment process into a more powerful tool for learning.

It is tempting to equate the idea of assessment *for learning* with our more common term, “formative assessment.” But they are not the same. Assessment *for learning* is about far more than testing more frequently or providing teachers with evidence so that they can revise instruction, although these steps are part of it. In addition, we now understand that assessment *for learning* must involve students in the process.

### **Are Teachers Ready?**

Few teachers are prepared to face the challenges of classroom assessment because they have not been given the opportunity to learn to do so. It is currently the case that only about a dozen states explicitly require competence in assessment as a condition to be licensed to teach.

Teacher preparation programs have taken little note of competence in assessment, and the vast majority of programs fail to provide the assessment literacy required to enable teachers to engage in assessment *for learning*. It has been so for decades.

In their 1988 research review, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam examined the research literature on assessment worldwide, asking if improved formative (i.e., classroom) assessments yield higher student achievement as reflected in summative assessments. If so, they asked, what kinds of improvement in classroom assessment practice are likely to yield the greatest gains in achievement?

They reported effect sizes of one-half to a full standard deviation. Furthermore, Black and Wiliam reported that “improved formative assessment helps low achievers more than other students and so reduces the range of achievement while raising achievement overall.”

To fully appreciate the magnitude of the effect size cited above, readers need to understand that a gain of one standard deviation, applied to the middle of the test score distribution on commonly used standardized achievement tests, can yield average gains of more than 30 percentile points, two grade-equivalents, or 100 points on the SAT scale.

This research reveals that these achievement gains are maximized in contexts where educators increase the

accuracy of classroom assessments, provide students with frequent informative feedback (versus infrequent judgmental feedback), and involve students deeply in the classroom assessment, record keeping, and communication processes. In short, these gains are maximized where teachers apply the principles of assessment *for learning*.

Black and Wiliam conclude their summary of self-assessment by students as follow:

Thus self-assessment by pupils, far from being a luxury, is in fact *an essential component of formative assessment*. When anyone is trying to learn, feedback about the effort has three elements: redefinition of the *desired goal*, evidence about *present position*, and some understanding of *a way to close the gap between the two*. All three must be understood to some degree by anyone before he or she can take action to improve learning.

### **Anticipating the Benefits of Balance**

Students benefit from assessment *for learning* in several critical ways. First, they become more confident learners because they get to watch themselves succeeding. This success permits them to take the risk of continuing to try to learn. The result is greater achievement for all students – especially low achievers. Furthermore, students come to understand what it means to be in charge of their own learning – to monitor their own success and make decisions that bring greater success. This is the foundation of lifelong learning.

Teachers benefit because their students become more motivated to learn.

Parents benefit as well in seeing higher achievement and greater enthusiasm for learning in their children.

In short, everyone wins. There are no losers.