

Using Assessment to Improve Instruction

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Transcript of the video:

I've been in Washington State for almost eighteen years now serving the community and technical colleges as the coordinator for outcomes assessment efforts across the system. In that capacity, I'm used to being something of a lightning rod for faculty who resent what they see as the intrusion of assessment into their normal routines. As one example, some time ago a community college faculty member complained to me that "Assessment projects are simply getting in the way of good teaching...We spend far too much time and energy in trying to assess learning, an unattainable goal... I love teaching, however. It is a great pleasure to share my enthusiasm for [my discipline], and I absolutely love the chance to pick the minds of my bright students..."

This complaint is typical of comments I've heard over the years and in many ways the perspective is perfectly understandable. For many people higher education assessment work is inevitably associated with a dominant, and misguided, strategy for improving K-12 education in this country involving a large dose of high-stakes tests and external accountability processes based on those tests. There is a different way, of course, and it's one grounded in the core elements of effective instructional practice. Pat Cross has called assessment "the zipper between teaching and learning," and that's an apt metaphor for its role, but in my mind it's even more tightly woven into the process than that: good assessment is part of the learning process, not just a means of documenting or judging that learning. Assessment can't really be separated from instruction; it's an integral part of what good teachers do on a routine basis through their classroom observations, activities, assignments, and tests. Good teachers are continually gathering evidence and providing feedback about how well students are performing—but for many teachers this work is not considered "assessment"—it's just good teaching.

The most critical understanding of student outcomes assessment as it relates to course-based learning is that *good assessment tasks are interchangeable with good instructional tasks*. Whatever else assessment is—and increasingly, it needs to be quite a few different things to address the variety of forces at work these days—from the perspective of student learning

outcomes, it is, in Paul Ramsden's words, ...a window through which teachers can study their students' learning...to provide data not only about students' abilities to reproduce information, but also qualitative differences in their levels of understanding of key concepts."

(1988, p.25)

If we believe that powerful learning involves changing our students' understandings of core concepts and ways of interpreting the world around them, we need to focus considerably more attention on what their understandings and working models are, both prior to and during learning. In our teaching and our assessments, to what extent do we encourage rather than discourage surface approaches to learning, in effect allowing students to simply comply with task and course requirements and avoid changing their conceptions of core phenomena/ideas? How do we create learning situations that allow students to work on discrepancies in their conceptions in a supportive environment that encourages risk-taking and exploration?

These are significant challenges, to be sure, but there are both compelling theoretical arguments, as well as strong international evidence, that the best way to address them is by focusing on assessment—on the kind of formative assessments¹ that could happen every day in classrooms:

- If the goal is to improve student learning, the central focus needs to be on where that learning occurs—and in the context of school (and college, for that matter), the bulk of the academic learning occurs inside the classroom (or as a result of classroom-initiated activities).²
- If assessment is going to serve in any meaningful way to improve learning, it needs to involve useful feedback to the person who needs to make the necessary changes or do something about it.
- For that feedback to be truly useful, it needs to be timely and focused on specifics the learner can do to improve performance, rather than focused on generalities about the learner ("A—good job," "C—sloppy work," etc.).³

Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam⁴ conducted a careful meta-analysis of a large number of studies around the world and concluded that there were significant positive effects from the use of formative assessments, both for students overall and in particular for low-achieving students, thus reducing the persistent and troubling achievement gap. They noted in particular that

interventions reporting the most significant improvements generally shared these core characteristics:

1. The work involved significant changes in classroom practice
2. The underlying assumptions about effective learning were addressed explicitly
3. The results were used explicitly to adjust teaching and learning

Clearly it's one thing to argue that an emphasis on classroom assessment is important and another thing entirely to actually do something about it, given the array of obstacles facing any large-scale attempt to influence classroom practices (the sacred tradition of the closed classroom door being arguably the most significant). The culture of American education, and particularly of higher education, makes it extremely difficult to even begin to truly understand, much less improve, what happens behind the classroom door. On the other hand, with sufficient resources and logistical support (and assuming a non-threatening, non-punitive context), a significant number of teachers are quite willing to share their work and learn from other teachers' experiences. The collective aspect of assessment involves teachers using actual assignments and student work to provide a powerful springboard for conversations about what works and what doesn't, grounded in specific and real classroom contexts.

Returning to the assessment critic I quoted at the beginning, I would suggest that if a so-called "assessment project" is truly getting in the way of "good teaching," then indeed it's not worth doing--but as I've tried to suggest here, something like that wouldn't really qualify as assessment in my book. The assessment of learning is nothing more than the act of observing, attempting to understand, and provide feedback on the ways in which students are grasping, integrating, and applying the material and concepts they are confronting in your classes, and I have yet to see a good teacher who doesn't do this sort of assessment in some fashion, regardless of what s/he may choose to call it.

And if assessing learning is really an "unattainable goal," then why bother giving students any sort of assignments or tests in one's classes? Certainly it's true that drawing clear causal inferences in the complex circumstances of college classrooms is extremely difficult, perhaps even unattainable. But I don't believe that the inability to draw such inferences means that assessment is impossible or that we shouldn't try to understand more deeply what learning is taking place and how it occurs. The work is simply far messier and requires more complex approaches than most people want to acknowledge, especially people are so concerned with

easy, quantifiable answers that they are willing to reduce "assessment" to simple grids and checklists (and often winds up becoming the "busy work" referenced).

Finally, to this critic I have to say: If you love teaching as you say you do, the question is, does sharing your enthusiasm for your discipline represent all that matters about teaching—that is, you don't really care what happens on the student end of the equation? Or by saying you love teaching are you really also saying that you love learning as well—that you love your discipline and you want your students to at least understand it, if not love it, the way you do? Of course I can't speak for you, but I expect it's the latter. I really believe that most good faculty, especially after teaching for awhile, would agree to the latter perspective and say of course learning matters. If so, then assessment (as I define it) is not something to be despised or ignored as irrelevant or impossible but embraced as an essential aspect of learning and the best way to truly understand and improve that learning.

Notes:

1. For a more amusing take on the issue, see Garth Holmes and Lynn Rodier, "Standardized testing vs. Formative assessment," at <http://bctf.ca/publications/NewsMagArticle.aspx?id=13140>
2. For a specific example in a science context, see "Classroom Assessment and the *National Science Education Standards*" at http://books.nap.edu/html/classroom_assessment/index.html
3. Elliot Eisner, "The Uses and Limits of Performance Assessment," also addresses the critical role of teachers in this process.
4. Black, Paul & Wiliam, Dylan. (1998). "Classroom assessment and learning." *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*. 5 (1), p. 7-73.

Video available at these locations:

- 1) <http://pandora.cii.wvu.edu/cii/resources/modules/assessment/default.asp>
- 2) YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZ3USs16J3Y&feature=youtube_gdata_player