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The Evolution of Assessment

Educational reform in the past decade has felt like a roller coaster ride for most teachers and schools. Schools reflect the changes that are occurring more broadly in society, and there seems to be no end to the changes (economic, cultural, political, and socioeconomic) that schools are expected to keep up with, or even lead. As Hargreaves (1994) reminds us, “Few people want to do much about the economy, but everyone—politicians, the media, and the public alike—wants to do something about education” (p. 17). The role of education is hotly debated in boardrooms, living rooms, and staff rooms.

Teachers and administrators are caught in the middle of what often appear to be conflicting and countervailing demands, struggling to maintain their balance. They are expected to navigate their passage through the unrest and uncertainty about how schools should be organized, what should be taught, how it should be taught, and how assessment should occur. At the same time, they are expected to continue to exert their professional influence by staying abreast of advances in understanding of human learning and of effective schools. The prospects are daunting, but the possibilities are compelling.

For a long time, extended education was available only to a small elite group. Schools were designed to provide the minimum education required for employment and engagement in the broader culture. For most students, this meant attending school long enough to learn the 3Rs and get a minimal understanding of the society in which they lived. Only a few students continued on to secondary school and beyond. Over time, as societies have changed, schools have evolved progressively from serving this elite group, to working with the larger numbers and wider aspirations of a middle class, to dealing with the responsibility for educating all young people.

For most of the 20th century, the conception of learning was a behaviorist one that focused on learning specific, discrete skills and facts in a hierar-

Assessment of Learning, for Learning, and as Learning

In Chapter 1, I described a “preferred future” for assessment. My vision is one that makes assessment an integral part of learning—guiding the process and stimulating further learning. The word *assessment* is derived from the Latin *assidere*, meaning “to sit beside or with” (Wiggins, 1993). Although this notion of a teacher sitting with her students to really understand what is happening as they pursue the challenges of learning is far removed from the role that assessment and evaluation have typically played in schools, many teachers have always done it. In this chapter, I look more closely at the various purposes for assessment that occurs routinely in classrooms. Classroom assessment is a complex undertaking that means something different to different audiences and in different situations. And so it should. Assessment has many purposes that sometimes support one another and sometimes compete or conflict with one another. As Wilson (1996) noted, teachers engage in a broad range of assessment roles, and keeping them straight is a challenging task (see Table 3.1).

Clearly, these roles overlap, and watching teachers try to manage the assessment activities and juggle them to satisfy the various goals shows how complex the process of classroom assessment really is. Also, tensions are embedded in these various roles and goals that cause concern for teachers. I hope that these tensions become more visible and understandable after I describe three different approaches to classroom assessment that have guided my thinking as I have contemplated the role of classroom assessment in my preferred future. The three approaches are Assessment of Learning, Assessment for Learning, and Assessment as Learning. Although I intend to highlight the contribution of Assessment for Learning and Assessment as Learning as part of a preferred future, Assessment of

Table 3.1 Assessment Roles and Goals

<i>Role</i>	<i>Goal</i>
Teacher as mentor	Provide feedback and support to each student.
Teacher as guide	Gather diagnostic information to lead the group through the work at hand.
Teacher as accountant	Maintain records of student progress and achievement.
Teacher as reporter	Report to parents, students, and the school administration about student progress and achievement.
Teacher as program director	Make adjustments and revisions to instructional practices.

SOURCE: Adapted from *Assessment Roles and Goals* (Wilson, 1996).

Learning is also valuable and has its place. In my mind, it is important to understand them all, recognize the inevitable contradictions among them, know which one you are using and why, and use them all wisely and well.

Assessment of Learning

The predominant kind of assessment in schools is Assessment *of* Learning. Its purpose is summative, intended to certify learning and report to parents and students about students' progress in school, usually by signaling students' relative position compared to other students. Assessment *of* Learning in classrooms is typically done at the end of something (e.g., a unit, a course, a grade, a Key Stage, a program) and takes the form of tests or exams that include questions drawn from the material studied during that time. In Assessment *of* Learning, the results are expressed symbolically, generally as marks or letter grades, and summarized as averages of a number of marks across several content areas to report to parents.

This is the kind of assessment that still dominates most classroom assessment activities, especially in secondary schools, with teachers firmly in charge of both creating and marking the tests. Teachers use the tests to assess the quantity and accuracy of student work, and the bulk of teacher effort in assessment is taken up in marking and grading. A strong emphasis is placed on comparing students, and feedback to students comes in the form of marks or grades, with little direction or advice for improvement. These kinds of testing events indicate which students are doing well and which ones are doing poorly. Typically, they don't give much indication of mastery of particular ideas or concepts because the test content is generally

Figure 3.1 Traditional Assessment Pyramid

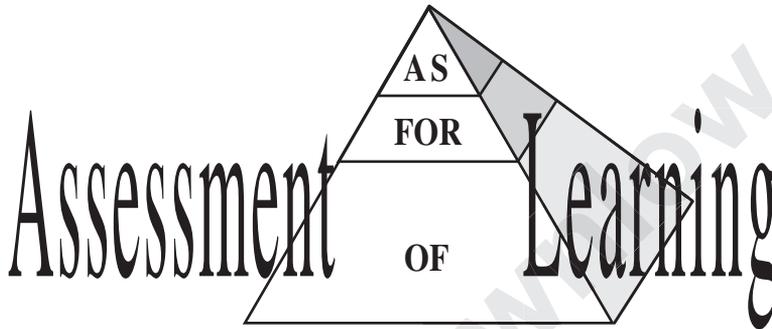
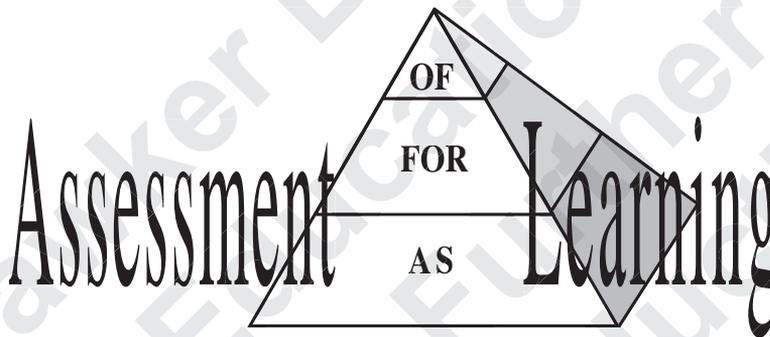


Figure 3.2 Reconfigured Assessment Pyramid



I really struggle with assessment. I'm supposed to be teaching for mastery of learning skills. What does that have to do with common testing?

This tension, which has always existed, is exactly the reason for reconfiguring the balance. Teachers and administrators can implement this reconfiguration without creating a major upheaval in what the community, especially parents, expect of schools. Parents always have their own children's interests at heart. When they can see how Assessment *for* and *as* Learning can contribute to enhanced learning and success for their child, it may draw them into the fray as willing allies in the focus on learning.

In this reconfigured assessment environment, assessment would make up a large part of the school day, not in the form of separate tests, but as a