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# INTRODUCTION

*I was going to put my move to the test, to see if it was real. It had to be real if it worked on the greatest player to ever play the game.*

—Allen Iverson

On March 12, 1997, as future Hall of Fame basketball player Allen Iverson's rookie season in Philadelphia was drawing to a close, his 76ers were at home facing the reigning National Basketball Association champion Chicago Bulls. The Bulls were led by Michael Jordan, not just the best player in the league in 1997, but the player whom many considered to be the greatest basketball player of all time. Chicago would end the 1996–1997 season with sixty-nine wins and only thirteen losses, while Philadelphia would manage just twenty-two wins against sixty losses. The Bulls would go on to win not only the March 12 matchup 108–104 but also the 1996–1997 NBA championship.

However, for Iverson, the March 12 game was all about a *moment*, not who won or lost. During the second half of this closely fought game, Iverson would take a handoff on the left side of the court and dribble to the top of the three-point line; it was here he found himself one on one with none other than Michael Jordan. This was not the first time they had faced each other (this was their third meeting of the year), but this night was going to be different. Iverson would do something that few had ever done and that would cement his reputation as one of the most lethal offensive players in the NBA.

For those with little to no basketball acumen, here is some background on that moment, starting with a *crossover dribble*. The crossover dribble is effective because the offensive player makes no advanced decision to attack but simply *reacts* to what the defender does. In essence, the art of the crossover dribble is for the offensive player to make the defensive player *think* he or she is going in one direction, only to have him

or her attack in the other. If the defensive player overcommits in one direction, the offensive player reacts, dribbles the ball to the opposite hand (crossover), and attacks the basket, trying to score or at least pass to another open teammate. The offensive player must, with some nimbleness, read the situation and immediately respond with quickness and agility; without the *agility* to adjust, the initial move (having the defender overcommit) is wasted since there will be time for the defender to recover.

The key is not just the ability to dribble the ball from one hand to the other—all NBA players can do that—but the ability to dribble with athletic *agility* and the ability to *read the situation* and *make a real-time decision* about when to pause, when to fake, and when to attack at maximum speed and intensity.

This athletic agility paid off during the game. When Iverson reached the top of the three-point line, he took two dribbles with his left hand, crossed to his right, sent the ball back through his legs to his left, dribbled once more on his left, and then attacked. Iverson dribble-faked to the left (Jordan moved with it), crossed to his right hand (Jordan recovered), paused, and then dribble-faked again to his left (this time Jordan overcommitted), crossed over back to his right (Jordan couldn't recover), pulled up from twenty feet and hit the jump shot!

Now, being the greatest of all time, Michael Jordan almost recovered to block the shot (which few could do), but he didn't. So, while Jordan was considered a smothering defender, Iverson was able to use his quickness and athletic agility to create the necessary space to hit the shot. Many pundits and former players still consider this moment to be the greatest crossover dribble in the history of the NBA.

## Instructional Agility

There are, of course, many differences between what happens on a basketball court and what happens in classrooms, but both environments require real-time decisions. When teachers use emerging evidence to make real-time decisions during instruction within the context of the learning they expect, they are demonstrating *instructional agility*. In many ways, teachers' best moves are tested every day against precise and exacting standards mixed with the social and political demands for the *growth* of all students toward proficiency. Limited time is the reality of all school systems. So, despite the fact that educators know learning is never final in the abstract, all school years come to an end. This means there is an inherent competition between students and the standards, not among students. Therefore, a teacher's ability to be instructionally agile on behalf of each student is critical to support his or her continual learning.

Whether at the classroom or school level, teachers can realize assessment's true power when emerging results determine what comes next in the learning. *Assessment*

is the practice of gathering information about student learning; how educators use that information is what distinguishes formative from summative assessment. Teachers use assessment information formatively when it guides instructional decisions. At its most organic, intimate level, assessment information allows teachers to make those instructional decisions at a moment's notice; that's instructional agility.

Being athletically agile means one can move quickly and easily without interruption; being instructionally agile means essentially the same thing. Making quick yet thoughtful decisions about what comes next is the real power of assessment in the service of learning. Like basketball players, teachers know what they *want* to do but can't necessarily forge ahead without assessing the possibilities. Certainly teachers with experience, and those who have intentionally created activities that lend themselves to quick instructional transitions, can plan ahead for anticipated responses. Understanding the typical errors students make can assist in preplanning the potential paths forward, but there is always the chance of an unanticipated outcome. Willingness paired with readiness, and precision paired with flexibility, allow teachers to develop the nimbleness required to maximize the impact of instruction.

## Assessment and Standards-Based Learning

Since the late 1990s, education has seen an acceleration of research on formative assessment (Black, 2013) and the near unanimous conclusion that formative assessment and feedback are an essential part of improving student achievement (Ruiz-Primo & Li, 2013). While teachers have always used assessment to judge student performance, classroom assessment in the 2000s and beyond has seen an infusion of assessment *for* learning—assessment not used to judge, grade, or score, but assessment to identify what comes next.

The inertia of the standards movement throughout the 1990s brought about a renewed interest in formative assessment. As schools explored the most favorable courses of action for having students meet the identified standards, formative assessment emerged as the most effective and efficient manner through which to expedite learning. To be clear, the idea of formative assessment was not new; what was new was the impressive potential of formative assessment practices within the standards-based instructional paradigm.

Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998) report that using assessment strategies to guide instruction through descriptive (rather than evaluative) feedback could bring about unrivaled achievement gains, with the lowest achievers benefitting the most. This pivotal moment accelerated the growth in formative assessment studies and produced an aligned position that when schools use assessment formatively, they can

close the gap between where a student is and where the standards expect him or her to be (Chappuis, 2014; Heritage, 2010; Sadler, 1989). More than ever, educators now understand how they can carry out assessment during the instructional process to improve both teaching and learning (Shepard et al., 2005), and how it can create a more efficient, effective path to proficiency (Heritage, 2010; Popham, 2008).

Standards represent a clear vision or outcome for what students are to achieve at the end of the instructional experience, which means teachers can now create clearer pathways to proficiency. By *unpacking* standards (which means deconstructing standards by identifying the learning targets that form the instructional scaffolding necessary to achieve the entire standard), teachers create *learning progressions* that allow students to see, with much greater transparency, what it takes to reach expected performance levels. Of course, educators have always associated assessment with measurement, and certainly formative assessment is a kind of measurement. However, efforts to gather formative evidence lead educators to intentionally shift to *qualitative* assessment (descriptive information about misconceptions and next steps). This balances the already embedded *quantitative* purpose (numbers and data that represent certain levels of proficiency—these data often tell what and who, but not so much the why or what’s next).

## Distracted by Data

Educators have, however, lost a little focus. While current assessment practices and tools demand a more sophisticated approach to classroom assessment, the shadow of the accountability movement has arguably diverted too much attention to quantifying every instructional moment. Teachers create formative assessment experiences that resemble a summative that “doesn’t count.” This happens when teachers use points on every assessment and make policies that make summative assessments worth more points and formative assessments worth fewer. Students perceive that those formative assessments, the important moments of practice, “don’t count” because teachers simply don’t add points in the gradebook. This distraction also occurs when every moment of assessment interrupts the learning progression. In other words, the teacher has to stop teaching in order to conduct a formative event. The impact of a teacher’s instruction will not reach its full potential through a series of events that intentionally disconnect assessment from instruction. The first half of the formative assessment equation is timing these assessments within the instructional flow.

The second half of the formative assessment equation is quality feedback that identifies *what’s next* for the student (Hattie, 2012). The research on effective feedback is rich, long-standing, and makes it clear that feedback in the absence of grades, scores, and levels is most impactful (Butler, 1988; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In essence,

grades and scores actually have the potential to neutralize the impact of educators' feedback because students either determine feedback to be unnecessary (when they achieve a satisfactory result) or undesirable or overwhelming (when they achieve an unsatisfactory result). Without a productive student response, feedback ceases to be effective (Kluger & DeNisi; 1996; Wiliam, 2011).

To be sure, data play an essential role in guiding a teacher's instructional decisions as well as determining the effectiveness of his or her instructional maneuvers and the overall general program when examined over time. The reference to data as a distraction is not a dismissal of the important process of tracking student learning. Individual classroom assessments, common assessments, interim benchmark assessments, and even large-scale assessments can provide data points useful for understanding the impact of instruction and can lead to maximizing the available instructional minutes. Data become a distraction when the accumulation of data—not the advancement of learning—is the motive behind planning the instructional activities. There is a place for data, but *real-time* teaching and learning are responsive to students in the moment, and teachers should not pause to update a spreadsheet.

## Assessment as a Verb

At its most organic, assessment is a *verb* we can infuse within the overall instructional process. Rather than having to stop teaching to conduct a formative assessment (noun), teachers move seamlessly among the moments of instruction, assessment, and feedback; though the lines still exist, they are blurry. The *assessment as noun* perspective leaves teachers with what appears to be an irreconcilable dilemma: *if I'm assessing my students day to day and minute by minute, when am I supposed to teach?* Seeing assessment as a noun—as a tangible event—creates the illusion that assessment is synonymous with a stapled package of questions and that assessment and instruction are two separate experiences.

The *assessment as verb* perspective allows teachers to assess and teach within a fluid instructional cycle where the teacher need not stop to conduct anything. Much like coaches, teachers can keep learning on track in real time and allow for the necessary maneuvers and advice to improve performance at a moment's notice. There is no moment when coaches are not assessing their athletes; they assess every serve, every tackle, every shot, and every rebound against the level of performance they desire (that is, the standard). In response, coaches provide immediate direction on how to close the gap between what the athlete displays and what they expect. Occasionally a coach will stop practice, however in most cases, he or she provides descriptive instructions *during* performance and expects the athlete to make the necessary adjustments on the fly. In other words, effective coaches are agile enough to know what needs to happen before the athletes' next opportunity to perform.