

**MYRON
DUECK**

GiViNG

STUDENTS

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SAY

**Smarter
Assessment**

Practices to
Empower
and Engage



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FOREWORD

Come into the elevator.

Some years ago, I led a team to develop the assessment scheme for New Zealand elementary and high schools (<https://e-asttle.tki.org.nz>), and New York City was interested in adopting it. My bosses told me that in business and politics, it is critical to get the elevator pitch perfect, since you often have only one chance to get the message across. My business developer worked on the pitch and trained me with religious zeal in delivering it before we went off to New York. Once there, we just happened to enter an elevator at the same time as Joel Klein, then-chancellor of the New York City Department of Education. Somehow my perfectly prepared elevator pitch went by the wayside, and we talked about... *sheep*.

I now have the chance to deliver another elevator pitch, so here goes: "Assessment is something we have done *to* students rather than *with* them." Pause and reread this message. If one sentence sums up the reason this book was written, this is it. This book's aim is for educators to work *with* students for a most just cause: to help students become confident learners who can interpret assessment information, use it to improve their learning outcomes, and be better prepared for the various challenges they encounter. The importance of this pitch is why I was honored to be asked to write this foreword.

I have worked in assessment for most of my career, and within the assessment community, we moved from seeing tests as valid *if they measure what they intended* to seeing tests as valid *if the interpretations are defensible*. In other words, if a test doesn't result in any consequential reflection, interpretation, decision making, or action, then it doesn't matter if it has all the lovely measurement properties that we psychometricians love. This shift, beginning in the 1990s, has allowed the measurement community to come into closer contact with classroom teachers to help them reliably interpret assessment data, make decisions based on the data, and act on those decisions. These skills are precisely the ones we also need to teach students. We should see the score as but the starting point.

But for too many students, the score is the end point, and the number screams to them that the work is now over. They know how to interpret the score relative to the scores of their peers, and they know that 100 percent is perfect (although in reality, 100 percent usually means that the work was too easy). Such a narrow interpretation of the score won't tell them about their gaps, strengths, and misunderstandings or help them decide what to do next.

I'd like to invite you to carry out two simple tasks. First, ask your students to grade their own performance on the next test *before* they start it. Second, after you have graded the test and written thorough comments, ask your students to write a short list of statements describing what they have learned about their learning and where they need to move next in light of your grade and comments. The results of this experiment will likely bear out what research suggests: that from about age 8 onward, students are quite accurate in determining their place in the achievement equation and predicting their scores—and that teacher grades and comments do little to help students understand what they've learned and where they need to go next.

After students complete a test, we should be asking ourselves what *we* learned—about what we taught well, whom we taught well, and the magnitude of growth that students have made from the beginning of the learning period to this point. Asking these questions will result in more informative tests both for teachers and for students.

Throughout this book, the notion of assessing *with* students is termed as a *student-centered* approach to assessment. With this approach, assessments do not dominate students' radar (as revealed by the eternal question "Will this be on the test?") but, rather, are seen as a supportive interpretive method to enhance student learning. This approach ensures that learning targets, instruction, learning tasks, success criteria, and rubrics are aligned *with* assessment. What is valued should be ever-present and aligned; therefore, the test does not dominate but becomes part of the learning process.

Assessment applies to so much more than achievement; it can be an invaluable tool to help us understand and effectively use learning strategies. Myron explores such notions as retrieval versus storage strength, desirable difficulties, solution generation effects, how to persist and enjoy challenges, spaced versus massed practice, and interleaving rather than blocking—ideas that have been known for decades in learning theory but rarely are practiced by those most empowered to influence learning. One fascinating idea is that rubrics can be powerful learning aids. I disagree with the common belief that rubrics' main purpose is to assess performance: of course they do that, but they also help students dive deeper and spread their wings of knowing, and they guide students' progression to a lesson's success criteria. Myron's exploration of rubrics as learning tools is just one of the powerful applications of ideas that make this book so practical for teachers and bring to life the goal of assessing with students.

Myron ends the book back in the elevator. If it were me in this elevator, I would ponder all my missed opportunities to talk about something other than sheep: *If only I had thought of presenting these great assessment ideas, if only I had the richness of experience and practice that is evident throughout this book, if only I had focused on conducting assessment with students rather than administering it to students.* Never mind. Myron is here, and he has done it for us.

John Hattie

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THE ELEVATOR PITCH

How can we make the case for student-centered assessment—and why is it important to do so?

Terry O'Reilly's book *This I Know* (2017) is a must-read for anyone with the slightest interest in marketing. And if you couldn't care less about marketing, you might just enjoy the background stories to the multitude of ads and products that've shaped our lives. O'Reilly bases much of the book on stories and lessons from his popular podcast *Under the Influence*. One of my favorite tales is that of Steve Jobs attempting to entice John Sculley to leave Pepsi and join Apple. In 1982, Sculley was at the top of his game and firmly entrenched as president of PepsiCo. Starting as a truck driver for the soft drink giant, Sculley had been climbing the Pepsi ladder for 16 years (Mazarakis & Shontell, 2017), though none of his work involved tech (Pollack, 1983). As president of PepsiCo, Sculley was the marketing genius behind the "Pepsi Challenge," which pitted Pepsi against Coca-Cola in a series of blind tastings, and he was considered a strong candidate to become CEO of the entire Pepsi brand. Seeing the effectiveness with which Sculley carved away market share from Coca-Cola—and the inescapable comparison to Apple taking on Microsoft—Jobs was obsessed with poaching Sculley. Unfortunately for Jobs, Sculley wasn't interested

in the Apple scene. Although Jobs offered Sculley a huge salary and lucrative stock options, he couldn't be swayed. After months of campaigning by Jobs, Sculley attempted to put the matter to rest in a face-to-face meeting with Jobs:

I've been thinking about it a lot and I'm not coming to Apple. I'm going to stay here in the East Coast doing what I'm doing. I'll be an adviser for free. Let's just be friends, but I'm not coming to Apple. (Mazarakis & Shontell, 2017, para. 41)

Most people would probably have left it at that, but Steve Jobs wasn't like "most people." Upon hearing that seemingly final rejection, Jobs walked up to Sculley and, 20 inches from his face, uttered his now famous line: "Do you want to sell sugar water for the rest of your life? Or do you want to come with me and change the world?" (Mazarakis & Shontell, 2017).

A week later, Sculley was employed at Apple. Ten years later, Apple was the most profitable computer company in the world.

O'Reilly cited this story to highlight the power and importance of the "elevator pitch"—the succinct encapsulation of an idea that takes no more than 20 seconds to convey. In his campaign against the formidable Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan had a simple, successful elevator pitch he posed to voters: "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?" (O'Reilly, 2017, p. 29). Any product you've purchased, movie you've watched, or book you've read likely came to fruition because it had an elevator pitch that convinced someone that it was worth producing.

According to O'Reilly, a good elevator pitch has a few fundamental qualities. It needs to be concise and captivating and reflect the essence of the organization or brand. "Pitches are an exercise in clarity," writes O'Reilly (p. 20), and they reflect the adage "Less is more." O'Reilly encourages organizations to distill their mission into an immediately digestible and compelling hook. Warning against our desire to elaborate, O'Reilly states, "If [your elevator pitch] takes a paragraph, it's not ready yet" (p. 24).

Steve Jobs may have understood the power of a good elevator pitch more than anyone. He described Apple as follows: "Apple has always had the ability to take really complex technology and make it easy to understand and use by the end user" (Arthur, 2014).

That's compelling—and likely the main reason why I am typing this on a Mac, own an iPhone and an Apple Watch, subscribe to Apple TV, and stop to admire a vintage Apple IIc whenever I pass one.

I've often wondered what responses you might get from a room of teachers if you asked them to produce an elevator pitch for their subject, class, or school. What about an elevator pitch for teaching in the 21st century? How might educators summarize their entire reason for being into a single sentence or two? While

I was attending a conference in Australia, John Hattie shared with me his simple quest: *Know thy impact* (personal communication, May 2018). I liked it. It was simple, powerful, and inextricably tied to feedback—for the teacher!

Based on the experiences of businesses such as Apple and authors such as Hattie, we will want to start with *why we are* in education, not *what we do* in education. In his book *Start with Why*, Simon Sinek (2009) encourages us to imagine we sell Apple computers, and he predicts that our sales pitch might start with this: “We make great computers. They’re beautifully designed, simple to use and user-friendly” (p. 40). Although this may seem logical and describe the essence of our product, this pitch is related to *what* the computer is, not *why* we produce it.

O’Reilly (2017) argues that in crafting really compelling elevator pitches, the most successful companies have a clear understanding of the business they are in, and some examples might surprise us. Nike isn’t in the shoe business; it’s in the *motivation* business. Michelin doesn’t sell tires, it sells *safety*. The marketing geniuses at Heineken no longer flog beer as much as they sell *inclusion, tolerance, and moderation*.

Following the lead of these top brands, perhaps educators need to clarify the business they’re in, and I’m not sure it’s education. I think we would transform our schools if we rebranded ourselves as being in the *empowerment* and *engagement* business. As U.S. representative and civil rights leader Barbara Jordan declared, “Education remains the key to both economic and political empowerment” (quoted in Newman, 1998, p. 124). If you think about it, throughout history, education is inextricably tied to empowerment.

We explored elevator pitches with our faculty at Summerland Secondary School (SSS) in British Columbia, Canada. Principal Alan Stel and I devoted a significant portion of our staff meetings to crafting individual elevator pitches to answer the question “Why attend Summerland Secondary?” It was an interesting and challenging activity, and the results were as fascinating as they were varied. Here are a few examples:

SSS helps to build students’ skills and confidence so that they can be successful in whatever path they choose.

We are small enough and big enough to create amazing opportunities for our students and staff. Our opportunities reflect modern realities and valued traditions to balance all areas of learning and to prepare our students for challenges known and unknown.

Small, Supportive, Innovative, Creative, Flexible... Like *Cheers*, where everybody knows your name.

I've been working on my own *education* elevator pitch, and a while back I arrived at this:

I empower my students through authentic learning experiences and engaging assessment practices. In all that I do, I develop meaningful relationships with students so that they become confident learners—better prepared for whatever they might encounter.

I've edited versions of this more than a dozen times, and I'm sure it'll live in continuous development. With each iteration, however, the word *assessment* seems to remain a constant. As much as I've tried, I can't separate my educational elevator pitch from the topic of assessment and why it must be student-centered.

Assessment is the language of learning. From establishing our purpose and defining the learning objectives, to evaluating student progress and reporting on it, assessment is, in the words of Dylan Wiliam, “the bridge between teaching and learning” (2018, p. 56). I recall teaching my own kids to ice skate, ride a bike, back up an ATV with a trailer in tow, and countless other things. Each experience dripped with assessment components: objectives, success criteria, evaluation, and feedback. In the case of skating, my back never really recovered, and the ATV trailer sessions had me periodically walking away out of sheer frustration. However, eventually both of my kids *learned* how to skate and back up a vehicle with a trailer—thanks largely to assessment and their part in it.

The word *assessment* originates from the Latin *assidere*, meaning “to sit beside” (“Assess,” n.d.). Let that reverberate through your mind. To sit beside. When looking at assessment practices in schools around the world, I'm not sure we're reflecting the true meaning of assessment. For far too long, assessment is what we have done *to* students rather than *with* them. Students need to stop being the people to whom we apply assessment processes, as if they were inanimate objects. Similar to how a lawyer might become a “partner” in the firm, students need to transform from being the employee to being the co-owner in the learning process.

Furthermore, this is not a student issue but a human one. People want to know the standards by which they are being assessed, how they will be evaluated, and whether they will have some input into the reporting of the result. I mean, seriously, how intrigued would *you* be as a student if this were the sales pitch:

Welcome, class. I'm going to teach for a while, and then sometime next week I'm going to assess you. After enough of those experiences, I will rank and sort you compared with others based on how well you've recalled the things I've told you. Your scores may affect your future in some dramatic way. Good luck.

Oh, and I forgot to mention, there may be some effects on your grades that have nothing to do with your understanding, but rather how you behave, treat others, display effort—those kinds of things.

I probably lost you at “I’m going to teach for a while....”

I’m not sure about the rest of you, but that “sales pitch” would largely sum up my assessment model over the first 10 years of my career. Clearly, it needed to change.

Support for a Student-Centered Approach to Assessment

A more learner-centered model of assessment has ample support. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is an international governmental forum whose purpose is to “promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world” (www.OECD.org). This Paris-based forum, to which Australia, Canada, Italy, the United States, and more than 30 other countries contribute, has taken a decade-long approach to helping governments respond to new developments and concerns around education in an information economy. In *The OECD Handbook for Innovative Learning Environments* (OECD, 2017), this multinational think tank presents seven principles for designing learning environments. Thankfully, the OECD states that it’s “unrealistic for a school or district to start working on all seven principles with equal priority” (p. 22). Although all seven are worthy of further study, for our purposes we will summarize three that support the student being the primary agent in assessment:

- The learning environment recognizes the learners as its core participants.
- The learning environment is acutely sensitive to the individual differences among learners.
- The learning environment operates with clarity of expectations and deploys assessment strategies consistent with these expectations. (OECD, 2017)

In his groundbreaking synthesis of research on factors affecting student achievement, *Visible Learning for Teachers*, John Hattie (2012) presents a ranked list of 150 items. The highest-ranked factor is “student self-reported grades.” To be clear, by Hattie’s own admission, he would rather have phrased this as “student expectations,” meaning that students are incredibly accurate in predicting their own level of understanding and achievement. Hattie states it bluntly: “Students are the best people to report on themselves” (personal interview, 2018).

Let’s pause for a moment to consider the ramifications. How is it possible that many of our traditional assessment models largely ignore the voice of the student when reporting learning, while research suggests that the student is the most important agent in the conversation?