SOFTENING the edges

Assessment Practices That Honor K–12 Teachers and Learners

KATIE WHITE

FOREWORD BY CASSANDRA ERKENS

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Preface

I once watched a ninth-grade student work through practice questions on a homework assignment. She worked diligently and confidently for forty-five minutes, but every three or four minutes she would sigh as she moved from one question to the next. Eventually, I asked her why she seemed so distressed when she was clearly able to complete the practice without much difficulty. She told me that she hated her homework assignments. When I asked her to explain, she said:

> Here's how it works. Teachers teach and then they give about six hours of practice and it doesn't matter if you "get it" after two. People who get it spend all that time working and those who don't get it don't do it at all. But nothing happens to them except their final may not go that well.

I then asked her why she continued to do practice homework when she clearly didn't need it, and she replied, "I don't know. I guess I don't want to disappoint anyone."

On another occasion, I was working with a learner to prepare for a test. As part of our study session, I asked him to predict what topics and major concepts he thought would appear on the assessment; I asked him to consult his notebook and determine the key aspects of the course. He seemed to resist this approach, muttering that it was useless to try to predict what the teacher might ask on the test. He stated that he had tried this approach in the past and it just hadn't worked. He explained:

> If you ask students to learn something for an assessment and then it doesn't appear on the assessment, you are teaching them that assessments aren't going to be about what we learn. It becomes a bit of a trickery session where kids try to guess what you're going to pick, as opposed to learning what they need to know, and it makes me feel pessimistic about studying because assessment is a game. But that's the reality of high school. It sucks.

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Both stories highlight challenges surrounding assessment in our current education context. In both cases, the students felt discouraged and frustrated by how formative and summative assessment occurs in their classrooms. They practice when they don't need to and are denied the opportunity to enrich understanding. Their time is hijacked by inauthentic assignments, and their energy is consumed with frustration at a perceived lack of consistency in the expectations placed on their peers. They complete work as a matter of compliance as opposed to investment. They are uncertain of criteria for success. They are unsure how to spend their valuable time when preparing for assessment, and they lack confidence in their teachers to align student needs with a measured response. They feel ill-equipped to experience success and control over their own learning, and they lack trust in the system. Even more troublesome in both stories is a resignation that things will never change and that their feelings and perceptions will never be heard or acted on.

It is clear that assessment has a bad reputation. Students may see it as verification of self-doubt or confirmation of a belief they hold about themselves and their value as learners. Teachers may see it as a necessary evil that manifests in nights of endless marking, comment making, and calculating. Parents may see it as a reflection of their child's behavior, intelligence, or even their own parenting. The idea of assessment holds a strong connotation for each person based on prior experiences and conditioned responses over time.

There are many reasons why assessment seems at odds with a vision of nurturing students and teachers in our schools. Evaluating, grading, marking, testing, scoring—each word holds tremendous implications for teachers. As educators, we steel ourselves every day to wade into the world of assigning value to student learning. It can be an unpalatable process, and yet we collectively share an understanding that it makes up a large part of what we do in our classrooms. However, when we view assessment as a mandate, and when we view our actions of assessing as diminishing what we are able do in our classes and how much we are able to meet student needs, it is no wonder current assessment leaves much to be desired.

When I work with new teachers, I notice our conversation always seems to circle back to assessment: specifically, summative assessment (evaluation) and reporting. There is a tangible and collective panic to figure out how to engage in this process before discussing anything else. When I ask about this urgency, they share how much they worry about *getting it right.* They understand that assessment can immediately impact their relationship with students. They see reporting as accountability to parents and to the system as a whole.

I understand these beliefs and the anxiety that accompanies them. However, I am concerned for new teachers because of what assessment seems to represent for them

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and because of how they *feel* about it. There is very little confidence when they speak of designing assessment events that reflect learning. I wonder what has happened over the course of these young teachers' educational experiences to have fostered this degree of anxiety and pressure when it comes to assessment. Perhaps their personal experiences with assessment shaped certain perceptions about what it means for teachers and learners. Maybe the tremendous swell in public debate surrounding accountability, standardized testing, and teacher evaluation has added to their anxiety. Simply searching the Internet elicits a vast selection of headlines with high emotional weight: "Stop the Testing Circus" (Rotherham, 2015), "Teachers' Unions Fight Standardized Testing, and Find Diverse Allies" (Taylor, 2015), "High School Seniors Aren't College-Ready" (Camera, 2016), "Teacher Evaluation System Is Latest Education Battleground" (Bowie, 2014). There is rarely a day that passes when the fight for ownership of education doesn't make itself known in mainstream media. The stakes may seem very high to these new teachers.

Students also may feel conflicted by assessment. I hear their frustration with assessment practices and their assertion that there is no way to advocate for their learning needs. I see their reluctance to explore feedback, and I hear their desire to have their work be valued or assigned a number because this is what they think school is about—that this number is the only thing that matters in the end. I worry about our students, and I wonder how their schooling has shaped them and their beliefs about assessment. I worry about the degree to which a single number impacts their perception of their ability and their options for the future. I have heard students declare a lack of ability in a specific area based on a single assessment result. I have seen students become painfully discouraged after an assessment event and refuse to even discuss the result and options for future learning. I have heard students mutter, "I failed," while handing in an assessment, even though the word *fail* has not been used in their classroom all year. I have retrieved students from bathrooms after they have become ill in anticipation of an assessment event. Assessment is causing stress for these students, and this stress reflects perceptions about assessment and how it works. If these patterns are not addressed, the stress will continue, potentially reducing achievement, optimism, and joy in learning through assessment.

Assessment has taken on a more sinister connotation in the larger landscape of education and politics. Terms like *high stakes*, *standardization*, *tracking*, *academic dishonesty*, *retention*, and *teacher evaluation* have shifted the meaning of assessment for many people, including teachers, students, and families. Sometimes it is hard to imagine that assessment could come to any good inside our schools anymore.

Nevertheless, I assert optimism for the word *assessment* and everything it *could* mean. I believe in assessment because I know that when used correctly, it is one of the most powerful tools available for holistically supporting students on their learning

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journeys. I believe in assessment because I love learning and the gift it offers human beings. I am optimistic about assessment because I love our schools and the people who live large portions of their days inside them. I see schools as places of joy and curiosity; wonder and practice; challenge and support. I love the relationships that flourish inside our buildings. I have nothing but hope that we can nurture schooling experiences where the focus continues to rest on these relationships among all people in schools as well as the relationships between the students and their own learning stories. I love that assessment can support these learning stories, build relationships, and foster curiosity, joy, efficacy, and healthy challenges for adults and students alike.

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