Chapter 47

Assessment and Learning:
A Historical and Theoretical Discussion

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ABSTRACT

This chapter has as its focus the assessment of learning. Assessing learning has taken many forms, and understanding its history helps to explain the educational systems that are in place currently. Defining the term, assessment, can be difficult because some definitions focus on diagnostic approaches that learning specialists use to assess learning disabilities or differences while others take it to mean evaluation. More recently, assessment has taken on an accountability emphasis. Assessment of learning may mean standardized testing that is mandated by the state. In higher education, assessment has a distinctly bureaucratic flavor, as it is required for accreditation. With assessment taking on this administrative focus, some of its value to improve the learning/teaching process is lost. This chapter addresses the history of assessment in education and provides examples of authentic assessment tools. Future trends in assessment are also presented.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment of learning is a hallmark of education. Without it, no parent or teacher would even know what was learned. The concept of assessment is so entwined with learning that it can be difficult to tease out the definition. Because of this, there are many different concepts of "assessment." Some take it to mean a diagnostic process to determine

what learning difficulties a student might have. Others take it to mean evaluation and testing in order for an individual student grade to be given. More recently, assessment has taken on a distinctive bureaucratic and accountability-based meaning coming from state, regional, or government accreditation standards. Because of all of these varied definitions and reasons for assessment, it can be difficult to provide a single characterization

of the phrase "assessment of learning." However, this chapter will attempt to provide an historical rationale for the various meanings of assessment and to place these in the context of K-20 learning. This chapter will also provide the basis for the concept that without meaningful and transformative assessment, the learning process cannot hope to ever improve.

Focusing on post-secondary education, Barbara Walvrood (2004) defined assessment as "the systematic collection of information about student learning, using the time, knowledge, expertise, and resources available, in order to inform decision about how to improve learning" (p. 2). Earlier, Catherine Palomba and Trudy Banta (1999) defined assessment in a similar way stating that "assessment is the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development" (p. 3). Clearly, the focus with these two definitions is on a systematic process that results in some knowledge about specific ways or areas in which to improve.

But during this same time, Richard Frye (1999) outlined two different types of assessment. The first, assessment for excellence, was focused on the formative process of improving our knowledge and skills by understanding what we currently know and comparing that to some standard. He stated, "assessment instruments are designed to answer a wide range of self-evaluative questions related to one larger question: how well are we accomplishing our mission?" (p. 1). The second type of assessment that Frye identified was assessment for accountability. This type of assessment was "a regulatory process, designed to assure institutional conformity to specified norms" (p. 1). But, since both are typically called "assessment," Frye correctly identifies that this becomes a source of confusion about the use of that term.

In the K-12 educational area, the term "assessments" is often used as a synonym for standardized testing. For example, the Missouri Assessment Program (http://dese.mo.gov/divimprove/assess/

staff.html) states that "the Assessment Section manages test development, on-going test maintenance, and oversees the test administration for four statewide, large-scale assessments." Similarly, the Texas Education Agency Website (http://www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/) states that the "Student Assessment Division manages and oversees the development, administration, scoring, and analysis of the Texas assessment program." Iasonas Lamprianou and James Athanasou (2009) have theorized that K-12 teachers spend at least one-third of their time focusing on assessment-related tasks. This means that assessment plays a very large and important role in education. However, is the time that is spent on assessment activities providing sufficient directions for improvement? Does the field of education use assessment to improve and enhance teaching and learning? Unfortunately, the answer to this question is clearly "no." But, educators could use assessment as a means to provide data on what needs to be changed, improved, or maintained. Assessment is now separate discipline – research findings, theoretical approaches, and methodologies. The K-20 educational system has an opportunity to focus on assessment as a transformational, sustainable, and useful process that can change the educational experience for students. Or, society can choose to stay in the process of high-stakes testing for accountability purposes that will only lead to more approaches to teaching-to-the-test rather than focus on real student learning.

This chapter begins with some traditional definitions of the term "assessment." Then, this chapter will trace the historical reasons for both the K-12 and the post-secondary approaches to assessing learning and the impact that these differences had on the practice of current assessment. Following this, a description of assessment as an authentic practice is provided to place the issue of assessment of learning within the context of higher education. Finally, the conclusion of this chapter focuses on assessment as a transformative process that is should be deeply embedded into the teach-

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