

Assessment *FOR* vs. Assessment *OF* Learning (January 2002) By Judy Arter

Editor: In the last issue of the Tackle Box we briefly mentioned the First International Conference on Assessment FOR Learning and a few of the points widely agreed upon at that session. In this issue we continue to look at the major big idea generated by that conference—conceptualizing what we do as assessment FOR learning.)

We need to rethink the role of assessment in effective schools, where “effective” means maximizing learning for the most students. What uses of assessment are most likely to maximize student learning and well being? How best can we use assessment in the service of student learning and well being?

We have a traditional answer to these questions. Our traditional answer says that to maximize student learning we need to develop rigorous standardized tests given once a year to all students at approximately the same time. Then, the results are used for accountability, identifying schools for additional assistance, and certifying the extent to which individual students are “meeting competency.” This, the logic goes, will provide the focus to improve student achievement, give everyone the information they need to improve student achievement, and apply the pressure needed to motivate teachers to work harder to teach and learn.

This is “assessment *OF* learning”—assessments that take place at a point in time for the purpose of summarizing the current status of student achievement. This type of assessment is also called “summative assessment.”¹

The major problem with this scenario is that there is virtually no evidence that our layer upon layer of large-scale summative assessments really have the intended impact. Bob Linn, a long-time, highly regarded measurement specialist put it this way in a retrospective²:

“As someone who has spent his entire career doing research, writing, and thinking about educational testing and assessment issues, I would like to conclude by summarizing a compelling case showing that the major uses of tests for student and school accountability during the past 50 years have improved education and student learning in dramatic ways. Unfortunately, that is not my conclusion.”

Now compare this to assessment *FOR* learning. Assessment *FOR* learning is roughly equivalent to formative assessment—assessment intended to promote further improvement of student learning.

¹ In the classroom, assessment *OF* learning is called grading. Please remember, however, it’s not that assessment *OF* learning is inappropriate, it’s just that it’s insufficient to maximize student learning.

² Robert Linn, *Assessments and Accountability*, **Educational Researcher**, 29(2): 4-14, 2000.

Formative assessment is not a new idea to use as educators. However, during the past several years new bells and whistles have been added that take its power to a new level³. There has been literally an explosion of concrete practices and good ideas that are linked to sound research.

In this evolving conception, formative assessment is more than testing frequently, although frequent informative is important. Formative assessment also involves actually adjusting teaching to take account of these frequent assessment results. But, formative assessment is even more than using information to plan next steps. Here's where the new bells and whistles come in. Formative assessment seems to be most powerful when students are involved in their own assessment and goal setting.

Student involvement is anything you do that helps students:

- Understand learning targets
- Engage in self-assessment
- Watch themselves grow
- Talk about their growth
- Plan next steps for learning.

Student involvement looks like:

- Developing criteria and rubrics with students
- Students using criteria and rubrics to evaluate the quality of anonymous work
- Students writing test specifications based on their understanding of the learning targets they are to hit and the essential concepts in material to be understood
- Students writing multiple-choice questions that match clearly specified learning targets
- Students talking about their growth, for example in student-led conferences
- Students planning their own next steps for learning

Lorrie Shepard⁴ past president of the American Educational Research Association makes it clear that assessment has lagged behind instruction in terms of incorporating recent research on how humans learn and what motivates us—brain-based teaching.

According to brain researchers⁵ human beings have an innate desire to learn; we are born with intrinsic motivation. Learning is required for survival. The brain is built to seek information, integrate it with other information, interpret it, remember it, and bring it to bear at the appropriate times. According to these researchers, conditions that tend to

³ There is increasing evidence that applying the principles of assessment FOR learning improves student learning. In addition to the Black & William results, add research on mastery learning and a forthcoming paper based on TIMMS.

⁴ Lorrie Shepard, *The Role of Assessment in a Learning Culture*, **Educational Researcher**, 29(7): 4-14, 2000

⁵ For example: R.N. Caine and G. Gaine, **Education on the Edge of Possibility**, Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1997; and Eric Jensen, **Teaching with the Brain in Mind**, Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1998.

drive out intrinsic motivation (provide a fight or flight reaction which inhibits the production of neuro-chemicals required to learn) are:

- Coercion
- Intimidation
- Rewards/punishments linked to self-worth
- Negative competitive relationships; comparing one student to another
- Infrequent or vague feedback
- Limitation of personal control (things happen independently of whatever I do; why try?)
- Responsibility without authority

Things that tend to increase intrinsic motivation and prepare the brain neuro-chemically to learn:

- Providing a sense of control and choice
- Increasing frequency and specificity of feedback
- Challenge without threat
- Self-assessment

Which set of features better describes the traditional way we have conducted our assessment business, large- scale and in the class-room? Which set better describes assessment *FOR* learning?

I have a colleague who was teaching a class on portfolios. In this class was a special education teacher who wanted to try student self-assessment in writing and tracking progress over time. She was afraid, however, that if students actually knew how low they were performing it would damage their self-concepts. But, she tried it anyway. She had her students keep selected samples of writing in a folder, learning to assess it accurately using a well-know writing scoring guide, and describe their progress at the end.

She report that her students scored themselves very low at the beginning using the scoring guide—mostly “1’s.” However, at the end, they were higher, more like “2’s.” She also reported that far from being discouraged, her students were very excited because for the first time in their school lives they felt they had control over the conditions of their success—they knew that they had made progress and they knew why.

Assessment for learning can result in assessments that:

- Encourage, not discourage
- Build confidence, not anxiety
- Bring hope, not hopelessness
- Offer success, not frustration

What assessments might we all conduct next week that our students wouldn’t want to miss?

