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The Value of Good Classroom Assessment

By Sid Barish

Back in the day, I associated classroom assessment with the means necessary to give grades to my students. The school published a calendar with dates for interim progress reports (mandatory for students in danger of failing) and quarterly marking periods clearly noted. My colleagues and I had to be certain that we gave enough quizzes and full-period tests to garner enough marks so we could fairly assess our students and issue grades we could defend. While I complied with this requirement, the tests for me provided a lot more than grist for the grading mill.

Whether I gave a pop-quiz to students or longer unit tests, I used the results to assess my teaching as much as their learning. To begin with, the short quizzes and even homework assignments I gave out offered me insight about how well students were learning what I taught early enough in the process for me to intervene before I lost too many of them. Sometimes on tests, in particular, I was surprised by the results. In many cases I polled the students on why they did so poorly. I was glad when a number of them were courageous enough to say that they didn't think I taught them what was on the test. At first I was taken aback by these comments since I knew I had, indeed, taught the work. What became clear to me, however, is that some of them did not "get" what I taught well enough to learn it and understand how to apply the knowledge.

This was a great revelation to me, and early in my teaching career it showed me the value of classroom assessments beyond

their use for grades. As I examined which items on my classroom tests many students answered incorrectly, I began to assess the clarity of the items themselves, how well they addressed the content I taught, and whether there was a better way to frame some questions. This analysis also caused me to find new ways to explain what I was teaching based on what my students needed. The give-and-take between my students and me informed my teaching as much as it helped their learning. And since kids will be kids, there were occasions when they complained about the fairness of a test when it was clear to me that their preparation was more the issue. Even those exchanges were for the most part even-handed and led to appropriate accountability of the students for their own work.



My early experiences with classroom assessment coincide with the more recent research by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998). Data from their work at Kings College in England revealed that when classroom assessment was used to enhance students' learning, there were increases in students' performance on external examinations. It seems to me that the converse may also be true. In other words, if standardized achievement tests are used as formative tools rather than summative measures, they too can be used to inform instruction and enhance student learning.

What Black and Wiliam determined in their research is that there is an important distinction between "assessment for learning" and "assessment of learning." Assessment

of learning was found by them to represent the more traditional view of testing to determine how much students know. Assessment *for* learning, on the other hand, indicates a role for testing that provides information to engender more and better learning by students. It is the classic struggle between formative and summative assessment and one that needs to be reconciled if testing is to be used to meaningfully make a difference in students' learning.

James Popham (2005) makes a similar point when he describes the importance of beginning with the end in mind. Popham emphasizes the need for teachers to determine what they want their students to know (learn), identify sound instructional strategies to accomplish those ends, and then collect test-based evidence to verify whether students achieved the desired results. How is it that testing in some venues has shifted from this approach?

“Tests that contain worthwhile tasks are useful tools to guide the work of teachers.”

I believe a number of factors have influenced the current state of testing in many places. One issue clearly has to do with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). That law requires public schools in the United States to test all students from grades 3-8 annually and show adequate yearly progress (AYP) against pre-defined state standards and proficiency levels. If a school's students do not earn high enough scores on its NCLB tests, that school is regarded as "failing." This leads to a frenzy among many teachers and administrators to focus on what they believe is the content on these state tests—a goal they sadly will probably never accomplish due to the ill-defined nature of those content standards and the unmanageable number of them.

However, many educators strayed from the positive features of formative assessment long before the onset of NCLB. And independent schools, which are not bound by the NCLB Act, often overlook the value good assessment can provide as well. While there are no hard and fast reasons for this, there are some likely explanations.

One has to do with the fact that before you can use assessment data you need to take the time to review it and then interpret what it means. Many teachers think they need to be an expert in statistics to make sense of standardized test results and conclude they have been away from it far too long to remember what a scale score, percentile, and stanine mean. The truth is you don't need to be a psychometrician to figure these things out, and the results are remarkably easy to understand if you are willing to spend a little time with it. The benefits to students, of course, are well worth that time investment.

The research by Black and Wiliam spoke clearly to this point. When comparing effect size, that is, the average improvements in the test scores of pupils involved in an innovation with the range of scores for typical groups of students on these same tests, the researchers found typical effect sizes of the formative assessment experiments were between 0.4 and 0.7. What is the practical consequence of such gains? An effect size of 0.4 would mean that the average pupil involved in an innovation would record the same achievement as a pupil in the top 35% of those not so involved. Similarly, an effect size gain of 0.7 in an international comparative study in mathematics would have raised the score of a nation in the middle of the pack of 41 countries (the U.S. in this case) to one of the top five!

Another detractor to the use of formative assessment is the importance parents often place on a single test score and the accompanying pressure they place on their child's school to score high. A comparatively good score is then translated to mean the teachers and schools are also excellent. When an assessment that otherwise presents useful information is used for this unintended purpose, its benefits are greatly diminished if not lost altogether.

The question, therefore, is not whether we should be using formative assessment to raise student achievement but how can we use it more often? If as Black and



Wiliam note, "formative assessment requires that the observed results be used to adapt teaching work to meet the learning needs of students," then we need to help teachers become assessors of test results and in turn teach students to become assessors of their own work. For this to occur, assessment needs to become an ingredient of teacher certification and an

ongoing part of staff development within schools. If we say assessment is important and we expect teachers to understand it, then we have to dedicate time to teach it to them rather than expect them to learn it on their own. Once teachers have the knowledge and skills needed to understand, use, and explain what test results mean, they will be equipped to handle questions from parents and others and deflect external efforts to shift them off course.

Moreover, if teachers understand how the assessments they (or their schools) use can provide helpful information about their curriculum and how well students are learning it, they can apply that knowledge to their daily work. Tests that contain worthwhile tasks are useful tools to guide the work of teachers. And teaching to the content and skills covered by these tests is equally worthwhile. This is a far cry from teaching to the items on a test, which only serves to reinforce that you want students to

come up with the "right answer." Lasting learning requires students to recognize where they are (what they know), where they want to be (what they want to learn), and how to get there (closing the gap).

A good test with sound assessment can provide a "reality check" on a school's curriculum and may provide a road map to curriculum development in areas where curriculum and assessment are not aligned. Similarly, if the standardized test being used provides a breakdown of component parts of a content area, teachers can zoom in on areas within that content where students may be showing weakness. They can then compare those results to other work the students are doing in class to determine the cause of the confusion. With the right amount of patience and perseverance, they can get the desired outcome.

Understanding the benefits of formative assessment is a lot like peeling an onion. It's a simple enough task to start with but becomes increasingly complex as you strip away the layers. Nevertheless, it is a worthwhile task once you uncover the rewards inside. After all, good work takes hard learning, and good learning takes hard work.

References

Black, Paul, and Dylan William. "Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment." *Phi Delta Kappan*, 80(2), October 1998: 139-148.

Popham, W. James. "Classroom Assessment: Staying Instructionally Afloat in an Ocean of Accountability." Paper Presented at the Educational Testing Service Invitational Conference. New York, October 11, 2005.

Highlights of the 2005 Annual Conference

The 2005 ERB Conference was held on October 17th - 19th, and was attended by almost 400 school administrators from across the country. Once again, the ERB conference proved to be an invaluable way for both public and independent school personnel to come together in the most unique forum in educational conferences. The conference addressed issues that concerned both sectors, as well as issues related specifically to public or independent education.

It was our great pleasure to welcome William Strauss and David Whyte as our keynote presenters. Mr. Strauss' wit and wisdom were welcome aspects of his address on the impact of generational changes in our schools. He also impressed the luncheon audience with an impromptu performance, akin to the ones performed by his satirical troupe the Capitol Steps. On Friday morning, Mr. Whyte's encouraging and inspiring message on courageous conversations was a delight to every attendee. His background in poetry was evidenced by his eloquent delivery, and he received rave reviews from our attendees.

Additionally, our session speakers were *(cont on page 6)*

Test Anxiety: Real or an Excuse?

At one time or another each of us has probably experienced the dizzying effect of test jitters. It may even have occurred during a test where you felt prepared and in a subject you thought you knew cold. Maybe it was a particularly difficult question that left you with a frozen stare on the page. Or it may have been a poorly phrased question that left you awestruck.

Whatever the cause, the result can be devastating to kids who want to show their best work but just can't get past the nervousness of taking a formal test. And while it is normal and even healthy to have a little nervousness before an important event, there is a clear line between normal trepidation before a test and test anxiety.

I have always regarded a twinge of butterflies before a test as a good sign. It meant I cared enough about the outcome to be concerned and in all likelihood prepared for the task. In such instances, my case of nerves was not the result of failing to study, consider the subject matter, or do whatever preparation was in order before the big event. It was simply a dose of insecurity that kept me focused and free of hubris.

Students with true test anxiety, however, tend to be consumed with worries. They are overcome with fears of failure, worthlessness, and not living up to expectations. In such cases, some children may experience physiological symptoms, such as sweating, dizziness, and racing heartbeats. For others, the symptoms may be more traumatic, including crying or throwing up on the day of a test. Whether you choose to view these symptoms as legitimate, psychosomatic, or an excuse for not paying attention in class, the result for the child experiencing them is very real. And an indisputable fact is that children overcome by test anxiety cannot be showing us their best work.

Easing the pain

In order to help students relax so the test can help reflect what they know and can do, some teachers think it is worth a little time and effort to help stressed-out kids calm down before exams. It may be something simple like turning down the lights and

playing soothing music to help students take their minds off their fear. Some teachers offer relaxation strategies to kids. The moment they start feeling anxious, the students may stop, take deep breaths, and quietly restore their equilibrium. When I am about to have my blood pressure taken or to get an injection, I often close my eyes and picture myself doing something enjoyable and relaxing (lying on a beach with a good book is the image I conjure up) and relaxation comes almost immediately. These strategies can work.

Good study habits instill confidence

Another helpful intervention for test anxiety is good study skills beforehand. There are the common sense recommendations such as reading in a quiet room or studying at the time of day that works best for the student. The SQ3R study method is also a worthwhile suggestion:

1. Survey the assignment or task before beginning
2. Question what's important by searching for clues
3. Read to find information to guide answers to questions
4. Review assignments and make necessary corrections
5. Recite new learning to check for understanding

It is not surprising to hear that test anxiety seems more prevalent nowadays. While pressure from

teachers and parents to succeed has been around for a long time, the use of high-stakes testing for retention, graduation, and admission is on the rise. There is no escaping state tests, for example, in this age of No Child Left Behind. All of this contributes at least in some measure to excess stress in students.

Clarify the Purpose of Testing

Tests may be a fact of life for our students, but that does not mean we cannot help kids adapt to the reality in ways that help them demonstrate their best work. One sure way to accomplish this is to provide meaningful feedback to students with tests or assignments given in class or for homework. Once students recognize that you are assessing what they have learned to know rather than what they need to know to get the right answer, they may begin to view testing as a means to identify possible strengths and weaknesses as well as a tool to help determine how to improve. Used in this way, tests are not viewed as a hindrance to learning, but rather as an aid. The more students experience this helpful form of assessment, the more likely they will develop habits of mind to help them relax even during a high-stakes test.

References

Beidel, Deborah, et. al. "Teaching Study Skills and Test-Taking Strategies to Elementary School Students." *Behavior Modification*, October 1999, pp. 630-46.

Black, Susan (2005). "Test Anxiety: Good study habits are the best defense against the testing jitters." *American School Board Journal*. Retrieved from June 21, 2005
<http://www.asbj.com/current/research/html>

Children's Proverbs

A first grade teacher collected well known proverbs. He gave each kid in the class the first half of the proverb, and asked them to come up with the rest. Here is what the kids came up with:

People in glass houses shouldn't . . . run around naked.
Better to be safe than . . . punch a 5th grader.
Strike while the . . . bug is close.
It's always darkest before . . . daylight savings time.
Never underestimate the power of . . . termites.
You can lead a horse to water but . . . how?
Don't bite the hand that . . . looks dirty.
No news is . . . impossible.
A miss is as good as a . . . Mr.
You can't teach an old dog . . . math.

If you lie down with dogs, you . . . will stink in the morning.
Love all, trust . . . me.
The pen is mightier than . . . the pigs.
An idle mind is . . . the best way to relax.
Where there is smoke, there is . . . pollution.
Happy is the bride who . . . gets all the presents.
A penny saved is . . . not much.
Two is company, three is . . . The Musketeers.
None are so blind as . . . Helen Keller.
Children should be seen and not . . . spanked or grounded.
If at first you don't succeed . . . get new batteries.
You get out of something what you . . . see pictured on the box.
When the blind lead the blind . . . get out of the way.
There is no fool like . . . Aunt Edie.

ERB Launches an Online Writing Program

In February 2005, ERB piloted its first online Writing Practice Program (WPP) and is pleased to announce that the program is available for full-year registration in 2005-06. Designed to be used in conjunction with the WrAP, the online version also provides a direct measure of writing ability by asking for a writing sample online from each student. Like the reader-scored WrAP, the WPP has five levels beginning with grade 3. Within each level, students may choose from a variety of prompts and submit their essays for immediate scoring within 60-minute writing sessions. Once registered for the program, students have unlimited access to the writing practice prompts, online tutorials, the scoring rubric and exemplar papers, all designed to help them improve their writing skills and practice what they have learned.



How It Works

The computer-scored WPP uses statistical models to assess writing, models that are based on scores that trained readers would give the essays that make up the "training set." This results in very accurate scores that can guide helpful writing practice by your students.

Once registered for the online program, students have password-protected access to a secure Web site. They can log onto the site from a computer in class, in the school's computer lab, or at home--literally 24/7! They submit an essay online after selecting a prompt from choices specific to each level. After submitting their essay, students will receive a score report within seconds. Once they receive their

scores, the students will have access to online tutorials that may help them improve their writing. Each essay a student submits will be available to teachers through an online portfolio of each student's work. In fact, a text messaging component allows teachers and students to communicate questions or comments to each other for reply when either party logs onto the site.

Benefits to Students and Teachers

- * Provides opportunities for students to work on areas of weakness identified by the reader-scored WrAP and other written work graded by their teacher;
- * Includes online writing tutorials to address noted weaknesses;
- * Offers unlimited writing practice with immediate feedback on 6 writing traits;
- * Provides exemplar papers at each level and prompt type to guide writing.

How to Order the Online WPP

ERB-member schools may order the online WPP by e-mailing erbonline@measinc.com or by completing an order form (available on page 49 of the 2005-2006 ERB Catalog, or on our Website using the "Writing Practice Program" link). If you would like to try a demo of the program for 1-2 weeks, contact erbonline@measinc.com and specify your name, school, the grade and number of students you would like to try the program. For additional information, contact Sid Barish at 800-989-3721, ext. 308.

A GUIDE TO ONLINE RESOURCES ON FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

A new guide from the Harvard Family Research Project contains information about what national organizations are currently doing in family involvement and home-school partnerships. It contains Web links to research, information, programs, and tools about parenting practices to support children's learning and development, home-school relationships, parent leadership development, and collective engagement for school improvement and reform. The resource guide can be used to find out what's new in the field, locate national organizations that support family involvement, and inspire new ideas.

For more information, visit: <http://tinyurl.com/aohzq>

LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF EDUCATORS

More and more educators are realizing the responsibility they bear for influencing policymaking for the sake of the children they serve and are stepping forward to work with decision makers in state capitals and Congress. In his latest editorial, ASCD's Executive Director Gene R. Carter explains why educator engagement in policymaking will be especially important in the coming months and years. "Is It Good for the Kids? "

<http://tinyurl.com/db8xl>

These messages are from the High School Principals' listserv, cosponsored by Nassau BOCES and the Long Island School Leadership Center. The LISTSERV is funded by a legislative grant through the efforts of NYS Sen. Carl Marcellino.

Highlights of ERB Conference 2005 (continued from page 3)

extremely well received - many of our attendees asked to have them back again next year! The depth and breadth of our speakers' knowledge on topics ranging from admissions, early childhood education, curriculum, self-esteem, and the media were invaluable to our program.

We are proud to have provided such excellent and accomplished speakers for our conference attendees. We hope that the sessions and messages offered this year will be useful to all of our members in their daily personal and professional lives. Please be sure to join us for our 2006 October meeting, for all of the networking, socializing, and learning opportunities that are the hallmark of ERB conferences. As always, we are looking forward to seeing you in New York!

Important Reminders

- * A new set of CTP 4 Constructed Response questions is in place for 2005-06, **so make sure to use only CR Form 2 booklets** if you are using the open-ended questions in reading and math! CR Form 2 will be used through 2007-08.
- * Please help us keep our contact information as up-to-date as possible. If there has been a change in your school's personnel, please fill out our online form at www.erbtest.org/pages/ERB_member.html
- * Please be sure to keep your CTP 4 test items secure. Do not release them into anyone's care, and be sure to keep them in a locked cabinet until you are ready to test.
- * **Tip:** To avoid confusion by parents about what CTP 4 covers, refer to it by level, not grade, especially if you test in the fall. By saying that a level 4 test in the fall of 5th grade is a "4th grade test," you may give parents the impression that their child is tested below a grade.



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