

Why Creative Assessment?

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It should be obvious to even the casual observer that an intensive focus on external assessment is driving educational reform around the world. Americans have the No Child Left Behind legislation, while the British have a version called Every Child Matters. Each set of laws has been imposed on schools and teachers by government bodies through a political process. None of the authors in this book intend to focus on the political debate regarding these laws; standardized assessment/evaluation is now a fact of life. Accountability and responsibility of the academic community to all learners is something we accept. However, because the drive toward external assessment speaks almost exclusively in terms of standardized testing, we need to be reminded of the internal purposes of assessment—measuring learning for both student and teacher so instruction can be adjusted and improved, not to satisfy an outsider with relatively uninformative statistics on how many students answered C on a multiple choice test. Our intent in this book is to present a more nuanced use of assessment in the contexts of everyday college classrooms and disciplines with a varied range of learners.

In his academic mystery novel, *The Missing Professor* (2006), Thomas B. Jones discusses the role(s) for assessment at the fictional Higher State University where professors sound suspiciously like people we know who hear the word assessment and hastily excuse themselves from the room. We provide his comments here as examples of what we do not mean by assessment:

First, assessment is time taken away from teaching and research, not to mention advising students. . . . Second, we are simply attempting to satisfy external agents and bureaucratic legislative idiots with a flurry of inapplicable, inconsequential mass testing and bogus statistical conclusions. . . . Third, assessment at this university and elsewhere generally demonstrates no trust in our skills and learning as professors. It's insulting. Fourth, you ask a bunch of students into a mass test that has no relationship to their classes here at Higher State and I guarantee you they won't participate . . . (pp. 2-3)

In Jones's fictional state university, assessment makes people shudder. But unlike the teachers at Higher State, many of us teach in vibrant academic communities that are fostering thoughtful deliberations about assessment, its meanings, and its uses in rigorous academic programs. Both formally and informally, faculty at institutions of higher learning all over the country are engaged in a variety of initiatives, both individual and collaborative, which strive to better serve student learning and rigorous teaching.

As noted earlier, it is not our intention in this volume to provide a venue for assessment bashing within the current national and international debates about accountability, funding, responses to outside stakeholders, and issues of control. Nor do we intend to use endless pages to defend academic freedom versus the emerging new attitudes about assessment. Rather, the authors of these chapters have a particular sense of the value creative assessment can and should play in their teaching and in student learning. We believe assessment is a necessary tool for refining the work of teaching and learning; otherwise, some of us might do nothing to change the status quo. Without assessment as experience, we might resist structures related to useful, day-to-day assessment.

These chapters are focused on the very real efforts of college classroom instructors to meaningfully measure what

they are teaching and what their students are learning. While these faculty efforts are not always affirmed by statistical T-scores and correlations, they are affirmed in other ways: higher levels of student engagement, measurable increases in direct student participation in courses, and improved collaboration between and among students. Each of these examples can and does lead to a deeper understanding of content and, therefore, may aid and foster improved performance on mandated tests. In the end, these authors also want their students to know and use content knowledge. Like Richard Feynman (see below) we also want students to deeply understand the ramifications of factual knowledge.

Assessment Defined

It should be obvious that assessment can be defined in many ways depending on its uses and the contexts in which it is applied. For our purposes, assessment is defined in a straightforward manner. We cite several variations on a theme below:

- “Assessment is the gathering of information about learners in order to make temporary decisions about instruction” (Harris & Hodges, 1995, p. 12).
- “Assessment is the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 4).
- “Classroom assessment is an approach designed to help teachers find out what students are learning in the classroom and how well they are learning it. This approach is learner centered, teacher directed, mutually beneficial, context specific, ongoing, and firmly rooted in good practice” (Angelo & Cross, 1993, p. 4). “The type of assessment most likely to improve teaching and learning is that conducted by faculty to answer questions they themselves have formulated in response to issues or problems in their own teaching” (p. 9).

Thus, as the reader can clearly see, we strive to lay out ways in which college teachers can affect learning in their own classrooms through a variety of assessment tools that respond to the real needs of learners, and not just at the end of a semester or term. The approaches suggested in this book focus on learning, on what students can do as a result of learning, and on how teachers can observe what students do. Furthermore, thinking of assessment in this way can allow teachers to change instruction midcourse and then shape and inform subsequent instruction to produce better learning.

So while some might see assessment as a measure to prove something to an external observer (or a state or legislature), we see assessment as an integral and essential part of what educators do: We measure the effects of our instruction. Readers of these chapters will quickly discern the focus of each author: improved teaching and learning of content. The authors of these chapters have found ways to monitor student learning that hold students accountable for context, application, and flexible habits of mind. We invite readers of this book to consider the applications described here and to tweak them, to adapt them, and to use them creatively for the support of learning that goes well beyond rote recall and memorizing facts. Facts do not solve problems in the real world. Rather it is how these facts are interpreted, applied, and used that makes all the difference.

Why Creative Assessment?

So why bother to focus on creative forms of assessment instead of the customary objective test that is easily graded with a Scantron machine? Is there anything wrong with the conventional test, the essay, or the research paper? Of course not. In fact, many teachers make wonderfully inventive and effective use of standard assessment tools. When we speak of *creative* assessment in this book, we are talking about assessments that spin, twist, and reform what might be a standard kind of assessment in an ordinary classroom.

The authors of this work believe that we are obligated to make sure that our students not only know the *facts* but know the material in *meaningful* ways. That means learners must flexibly and creatively use that factual content to solve real-world problems and to develop habits of mind for dealing with life so they are not smacked down at failure; they merely try another approach, gather more or other data, and effectively change their response. Recitation of facts, without conscious and meaningful applications to the real world in which we all live, gives learning little meaning and makes it impractical at best.

The chapters included here represent a cross section of the possibilities available to classroom teachers who are willing to step out of their comfort zones and who ask how teaching affects learning. When that barrier is crossed, options become available, substance can be addressed, and outside stakeholders will still have the evidence they need to support schools and teachers. There is no shortage of reports in the media of business leaders who decry the inability of workers to solve problems in the workplace and to collaborate with others to find solutions to problems for real people. In his book *Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman: Adventures of a Curious Character* (1985), physicist Richard P. Feynman describes his encounter with a group of brilliant Brazilian physics students working with reflection and polarized light. They captured his every word in copious notes, they could recite the details of his lectures, they knew the facts and could recall lengthy definitions and formulae. In the end, however, what they could not do was to explain in plain language what they learned and to what uses it could be put. Feynman reported,

After a lot of investigation, I finally figured out that the students had memorized everything, but they didn't know what anything meant. When they heard "light was reflected from a medium inside an index," they didn't know it meant in a material *such as water*. They didn't know that the "direction of light" is the

direction in which you *see* something when you're looking at it, and so on. Everything was entirely memorized, yet nothing had been translated into meaningful words. (pp. 212–213)

Feynman noticed what the authors of this volume also notice. Memorization is not enough; knowledge must end up in practice and doing. And that may well mean moving outside of accepted or normal practice. Feynman was appalled with the shallowness of his students' learning and their inability to make sense of newly acquired factual storehouses. We suggest that current college instructors should likewise not settle for factual knowledge by itself.

How Should Assessment Serve Students and Teachers for Instructional Purposes?

So how should college teachers use these examples of creative assessment? They should consider them to be starting points and the beginning of an internal discussion on what matters most in the courses they teach. What components of each course count the most for solving a range of problems in this discipline? If facts are important, and they usually are, how can they be used to support a flexible approach to thinking, solving, considering options, gathering, and interpreting evidence? What are the facts not telling us? We believe that creative assessments, like the ones in this book, should be used alongside a range of assessments, even including objective tests and standardized tools, to build a multifaceted, agile thinking citizenry who do more than *do what they're told*.

References

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