

Time to Rethink Assessments

by *Bambi Betts*

Decades of formal education have demonstrated the power of assessment tools and procedures in improving student learning. Yet, today's educators continue to receive mixed messages.

A typical faculty meeting discussion about how we determine what and if students are learning, will inevitably raise more questions than it answers. The topic is central to the debate on curriculum content and teaching methodology.

Can we truly measure learning? Are all valued outcomes assessable? The tests we use have worked for decades. Why do we need to rethink assessment?

The verdict is in: current forms of assessment shortchange both students and teachers. They stop short of providing the full range of what we need to know about our students, and yet continue to dictate both how and what teachers teach, as well as what further learning opportunities students will be offered. It's time for improvement.

A review of the current thinking on assessment provides a rather reasonable base for rethinking assessment. Phil Selecty points out in his writing about schools for the 21st century that in past decades schools have been charged with educating citizens for an industrial-based society. With the shift to an information-based society, schools today need to be more concerned with developing "knowledge-workers," where the emphasis is on expanding mental effort.

Peter Drucker in his book *The Effective Executive* similarly describes how society's needs have changed in the kinds of workers required. "Manual workers," those directed by others, are in less demand. Society is propelled by what he describes as "executives," individuals at all levels who are responsible for making critical decisions.

Others, including Thomas Sergiovanni, Kevin Ryan, and Thomas Lickona, suggest that the definition of an educated person must include the moral dimension. Parents worldwide expect schools to produce students who can think critically, solve real problems, support themselves, and be reasonably happy in the process. Clearly, the definition of an educated person is changing; our assessment tools fall miserably short in offering evidence of these kinds of outcomes.

At the same time that society is shifting from an industrial to an information base, our understanding of how human beings learn is rapidly expanding. As late as the 1970's, candidates for teaching certification were versed in the factory model of learning: skills and information and comprehension stages had to precede the "higher orders" of thinking – analysis, evaluation and synthesis. Although these were counter theories (Piaget, Gestalt), the deposit theory of learning prevailed; teaching was equated with learning.

Because we based our teaching on a lockstep learning theory, we understandably designed assessment tools that could measure bits of skills and pieces of information.

But new research (Gardner, Kegan constructivism) is rapidly debunking the foundations upon which have build both teaching and assessment practices. There is now compelling evidence that meaning is constructed by the learner, not engraved by the teachers; that there are numerous ways individuals' "learn" the same information of skill; that there are multiple ways of expressing a similar learning; that many brain functions are at work simultaneously, even in you children.

Although educators have been armed with the expanding definition of an educated person from every perspective, pressure remains to utilize the same tools to assess progress and success that were used to assess older, more limited learning outcomes. It's like trying to determine the quality of the car you just bought using the criteria for a good horse and buggy.

During the industrial age, when the ability to recall information was one of the most essential products of our educational system – often the most essential- we developed tools to measure that ability; conventional paper- and pencil tests, "standardized" tests, multiple choice tests. The assessment tools represented what was valued and what was understood about learning. And for most, they were 'valid' in the sense that they did a fair job of measuring what they were designed to measure.

Our old models worked when what was important were facts and individual skills. In addition to the need to have information, we have identified a host of other equally critical habits and qualities, such as the ability to work collaboratively, thinking critically, define complex problems, and invent a range of viable solutions. New tools and practices are clearly in order.

Arguments for maintaining assessment practices of past decades abound. The most common one proposes that while they may not measure ALL the outcomes our educational programs plan for our students, they do measure some and are therefore worth keeping.

Several issues need to be considered: to what extent is reliance on and comfort with these "tests" keeping us from designing more richly laden assessments;

are we just testing what is easy to test rather than what is truly valuable learning?

As long as we have these tests, we are likely to continue to make critical learning decisions for students from their results (e.g., access to certain classes or parts of the curriculum); to what extent are such tests driving what we do in the classroom?

If we are going to teach to a test, let it be as rich as possible in the information it provides us about a student's learning. If our goal is to develop critical thinking but our tests examine only knowledge and comprehension, isn't it likely that some teachers may just "skip" teaching their students how to rethink critically?

And then there are those who propose we go "back to basics," in content, methodology, and assessment. Proponents of this proposal misjudge the definition of 'basics.'

In it's recent reform efforts, at least one state (Iowa), through a collaborative effort with the industry, undertook to redefine what individuals and societies truly need and called it the "New Basics".

It's contents are not surprising; it lists not only the necessity for knowledge, but includes collaboration, flexibility, problem-finding and problem-solving, etc.

The American Association of School Administrators recently published it's "definition" of basics based on a Delphi study with a panel of 55. Again, it shares the concept of a solid knowledge base with the old basics, but calls for the definition to be broadened to include such things as negotiating skills, self-improvement skills, collaborative skills, etc. The assessment challenge remains; how will we know if our students have achieved such goals as these if we do not develop more adequate assessment tools and practice?

The greatest albatross, the catch-22: students will need to know how to take these tests later in life, so we had better give them lots of practice now. True educational reform – the kind that dramatically improves student learning – cannot accommodate such circular reasoning. In fact, much of what education is today is a result of doing what we've always done because we will be expected to do it again next year.

Do we continue to use outmoded assessment tools because we believe the next institution receiving the student requires it? Serious institutions of higher learning will certainly respond to richer, more meaningful data about their candidates.

Perhaps the most compelling reasons to rethink our assessment practices is because of its power as a drive of instructional practices. If a teacher knows that the multiple-choice test is the final assessment, how much class time is likely to be spent on complex thinking activities?

We are all, teachers and students, conserved; as Grant Wiggins, well-known assessment guru, says: "What get assessed gets learned." Designing rich, complex, assessment tasks that simulate essential human abilities is a significant key to improving student learning.

Our challenge now is not to twist the traditional assessment models into workable tools. The criteria, for evaluating the car is brand-new; it has little in common with the horse and buggy criteria. Rather, the challenge is to accept that, in both learning theory and societal need, we have grown beyond the understandings of past decades.

It is time to seriously study and experiment with designing tools that truly form evidence of the learning outcomes we now know we can expect and that are essential to both the individual and the societal agenda.