

2

ISSUES REGARDING ASSESSMENT AND THE UNIQUENESS OF LEARNERS

The Appropriate Role of Assessment

The Standards Movement is filled with benefits, as well as unintended consequences for the at-risk learner. On one hand the high stakes testing, the public airing of data on schools and students, and the accountability spot-light that standards place on schools makes it increasingly difficult for school systems to ignore the long-term trends of inequitable student performance. A few years ago a lead editorial in USA Today pointed out,

For years there was an unspoken agreement between schools and middle-class parents:

- ◆ Schools prepared the higher performing students for college, a job, and another round of middle-class life,
- ◆ and the rest of the students were kept out of the way. They were passed from class to class, grade to grade, and eventually handed a diploma that nobody looked at when they applied for a job at the mill, or signed up for welfare as a teen mom....
- ◆ those kids who could remain invisible 10 years ago, many of them black and Latino, now need a real education to survive. And they aren't getting it.
- ◆ The proof is in the standardized tests that most school systems are now administering....

- ◆ Yet state after state report a distressing gap between the performance of white and minority students. In Texas, black and Latino children fail at twice the rate of whites....
- ◆ That's why high stakes testing is so important. It forces action. Based upon such tests, New York City plans to send 250,000 children to summer school this year. Chicago has sent 20,000 children to its summer program for each of the last 3 years....
- ◆ Such moves... dispel the notion that it is OK for schools to fail minority students as long as nobody notices (*USA Today*, May 30, 2000, p. 16).

However, one would be wrong to think that these reforms are without flaws. In response to that editorial, Janell Byrd-Chichester of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund argued:

In the 1960s when black children sought to desegregate the schools of Macon County, Alabama, the white schools adopted a new admissions requirement: standardized tests. Likewise after James Meredith moved to desegregate the University of Mississippi, the state adopted the same tactic, barring 70 percent of its black students from the best-funded schools for the next 30 years.

Today under the banner of "improving standards" high stakes testing is sweeping the county. The civil rights community fought for standards based reform: high academic standards for all children incorporating assessments aligned with high quality curriculum and instruction, teacher training, and adequate resources. Unfortunately we are getting high stakes testing—a simplistic method that's grinding educational reform to a narrow and punitive edge... (*USA Today*, May 30, 2000, p. 16).

For those of us concerned about narrowing the achievement gap between the advantaged and the at-risk, it simply isn't enough to let the political pressure build as more and more disadvantaged students fail to achieve their potential. Hopefully, *USA Today* is correct in that by taking the scandal of inequitable achievement out of the closet, disadvantaged students will reap a benefit. But, Ms. Byrd-Chichester is also correct that our job as educators is to ensure that disadvantaged children attend schools with "high quality curriculum and instruction" from teachers who have received top-notch "teacher training." It is imperative that we do everything within our power to help *all* our students succeed at the tasks placed before them. At the opening of the 21st Century one of the most compelling and "high stakes" tasks that our students will encounter are state mandated proficiency tests.

This is why it is imperative that we develop skill with classroom assessment. Those teachers who are able to effectively and efficiently assess their students'

strengths and weaknesses, with regard to the outcomes measured on state mandated evaluations, will be far better equipped to coach their students to high levels of performance on those exams. Conversely, if during instruction we aren't able to accurately take our students' pulse and assess their educational vital signs, our students will become hostage to the winds of fortune when the state tests are administered.

But, preparation for high stakes evaluations is not the only reason why we, as teachers of those at risk, should invest in becoming skilled classroom assessors. An equal, if not more important reason to focus on assessment, is the role assessment can play in building a student's sense of "potency." The resilient students, those children who believe in the very depths of their soul that they will prevail, didn't develop those attitudes through attendance at a "positive image building assembly." Rather, those attitudes grew from having credible data on their own past accomplishments. The more formative experiences children have with quality feedback on their work, the more likely it is that they will develop confidence in their ability to persevere and ultimately achieve success.

Educators often talk about the difference between "intrinsic" reinforcement (deriving satisfaction from the joy of doing the work) versus "extrinsic" reinforcement (effort which is motivated by the expectation of tangible rewards), we will argue in this book that the use of extrinsic reinforcement can be justified as an appropriate, but *interim strategy*. That notwithstanding, like most educators and parents, it is our fervent desire to see our students motivated through internal mechanisms rather than external devices. The best classroom assessment practices, in our opinion, are those that enhance the students' ability to monitor their own learning and to initiate changes, when and if, the *student* feels adjustments are warranted to achieve goals of *personal* value.

According to Rick Stiggins (2000) there are five principles that should guide educators when working with classroom assessment:

- ◆ Clear thinking and effective communication
- ◆ Teachers in charge
- ◆ Students as key users
- ◆ Clear and appropriate targets
- ◆ High quality assessment

A discussion of the first four characteristics and their relevance for working with the defeated and discouraged learner follows. In Chapter 6 we discuss building quality authentic assessments.

Clear Thinking and Effective Communication

Oftentimes we talk in a very different language or use professional vocabulary when addressing students. This may explain why frequently we think we said something while the students are equally convinced that we didn't. We need to be careful that we aren't talking past our students. When we use language that is incomprehensible to our at-risk learners, our defeated/discouraged learners will logically infer that we neither expected nor cared if they learned the material. Once a student draws that conclusion it is almost certain that they cease trying.

Teachers in Charge

Ultimately it is the teacher who decides what is to be taught and how it will be taught. Consequently, it is the teacher who decides what the purpose of a lesson is and what the student should be expected to learn from a classroom experience. If students become accustomed to seeing a clear alignment between what they were taught, what was expected by their teachers, and what was assessed; they will tend to take the assessments seriously. Conversely, if the assessments appear to bear little or no resemblance to the work the students completed and which the teacher taught and graded, then it is unlikely the student will invest much energy in completing the assessment or reflecting upon the results.

Students as Key Users

One characteristic of defeated/discouraged learners is that they tend to see themselves as victims (this will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 7 where we discuss "potency") not as empowered actors. Often they have concluded that they are simply pawns for others to move around, anything but key players in the system. Students who hold this perspective tend to see "assessment" as something that is being done to them for someone else: a report for the Board of Education, for the State or the Federal government, or as part of a report card "for their parents." As a result no one should be surprised to find that these students could care less about how well they do. Any teacher who has tried to motivate their alienated students to give their best effort on mandated standardized exams knows how difficult a task this can be!

However, if and when students see personal value in an assessment they will tend to take the entire process far more seriously. If you doubt the truth in that assertion, just watch a young person playing a video game or learning a new skateboarding trick. You will note that they care very deeply about the data on their performance and the feedback they are receiving. Why? Because the ar-

dent video-game player and skater knows that attending to this “feedback” inevitably helps improve performance!

Clear and Appropriate Targets

Anyone who has ever prepared for a test has probably wondered aloud, “I wonder what will be on the exam?” If we stop and reflect on that question it is hard to escape the underlying absurdity. Should a school exam be a test of students’ mind-reading ability or their ability to predict what card will show up at the top of the deck? Of course not. The purpose of an exam should be to help the interested parties (generally the student and the teacher) ascertain if a particular skill/knowledge was acquired. If we go to a golf instructor and ask for help straightening out a slice, we know what the test will be before we start. The test will be hitting golf balls to determine if we can hit it straight. Confusion over targets diverts the learner’s energy away from the real purpose of instruction which is learning and instead focuses it on guessing. The big problem with this is not just that it is inefficient, there is much in our lives that fails on the efficiency scale. No, the terrible thing about the guessing game for our students with an external locus of control (this concept is discussed at length in Chapter 7) is that it breeds frustration, alienation, and giving-up. As the student finds it increasingly difficult to predict what trivia will appear on the test it becomes rational to conclude, “Why bother?”

We are sure many readers will be able to identify with the following statement. Tanis Knight (1998) frequently asserts, “Any student (or any teacher for that matter) can hit any target, providing they can see the target and the target will stand still long enough.” If we had a dollar for every time we’ve heard a frustrated teacher complain about the state assessment saying, “Why don’t they just tell us what they plan to test the kids on,” or “It sure would be nice if we could keep the same test or use the same curriculum for more than 2 years!” we’d be rich.

If one reflects on it, it isn’t hard to see why so many teachers lack an internalized belief in their ability to prevail. How could someone possibly be confident that they will be successful when they don’t even know what it is they are supposed to be succeeding at?

Stopping to Look Down the Road

Later in the next chapter when we discuss mastery learning we will suggest strategies to assist students in becoming clear on our achievement targets. At this point we simply want to introduce this topic by suggesting one simple task. Before engaging in any major learning activity or beginning any unit of instruc-

tion, stop what you and the students are doing, and ask yourself (or them) what exactly are we/you trying to accomplish?

Dick recalls vividly a day several years ago when he was teaching a basic writing class to high school sophomores. Feeling that modeling was a powerful technique, he decided to teach his students the skill of peer editing by having them take a crack at revising a journal article he had been drafting. Dick gave each student a copy of his first draft, asked them to read it, and answer a set of questions on an "editor response sheet." The first question asked,

"In one sentence restate the author's main idea."

No sooner had the students settled into the assignment when Dick realized how great an idea this lesson was. He had never seen this group of students so on-task. Smugly, Dick thought to himself, this "modeling" thing is good stuff, they really are into it!"

After a few minutes Dick asked, "OK, who would like to restate my main idea in one sentence?" Instantly a sea of hands went up. Eagerly Dick called on a particularly excited student.

The student began, "I think you were trying to say..."

Dick responded, "No, that wasn't what I was trying to say, someone else?"

Another student jumped in, "What I thought you were trying to argue was that..."

Again, Dick responded, with a noticeable drop in excitement, "No, not exactly, that wasn't my main idea....any body else have an idea on what I was trying to say?"

Another brave soul piped in, "Did you mean to say that...?"

"No," Dick, disappointedly added, "I don't think you got it, anyone else?"

Then a frustrated student shouted out, "Obviously we didn't get it. So what was your main idea?"

Sadly, Dick had to acknowledge that the student's question was quite reasonable. By now all the hands were down and clearly no one was confident of their ability to discern the main idea. So Dick shared, "What I was really trying to say was..."

No sooner had he finished when another student yelled out,

"THEN, WHY DIDN'T YOU JUST SAY THAT!!!"

Ah, out of the mouths of babes! The students were absolutely correct. Dick was working so hard trying to impress his readers with his "scholarly voice"

that his ideas had become lost in his slavish attention to polysyllables. Dick learned two things from this episode. First, now when he writes he tries to be clear and concise and make use of plain English (at least in his opening paragraphs). Second, and probably more importantly, he now realizes that readers, like learners, appreciate knowing where it is they are going!!

Think and Do Exercise—Clarifying Targets

- ◆ Without prompting ask your students to write down (or tell a neighbor) what precisely they believe *you* want them to be able to do/demonstrate at the conclusion of the current unit/lesson.
- ◆ Or, if you are using a constructivist methodology, ask your students to write down or tell you what it is that *they* expect/hope to learn or be able to do at the conclusion of the project/activity they are currently engaged in.

Review the Responses

If it was a teacher directed activity and your students were clear on the target that you were directing them toward, then the ideas, (if not the precise words), written by each student should be almost identical. If not, it means your students lack clarity on the target you are asking them to hit.

If you were having your learners construct their own educational experience, react to the targets they shared:

- ◆ Were they meaningful?
- ◆ Will they contribute to the student's attainment of valued outcomes?
- ◆ Will this performance translate to high performance on state/district assessments?
- ◆ Does the quality of the targets differ by categories of students (gender, race, etc.) and/or is everyone pursuing valuable learning?

Before we move too deeply into the "how to" portion of this book, it will be helpful to pause and consider some key differences between learners.

The Uniqueness of Our Learners

The act of teaching, as with all the true professions, requires constantly making choices. Occasionally this is easy. Solving routine problems (such as taking

and maintaining attendance records) simply requires the use of one accepted method. However, what separates professionals from other workers is the nature of the decision making that is required. If and when, the problem encountered is non-routine; i.e., when the patient doesn't respond to the treatment prescribed by the doctor or when the student fails to learn even though the teacher is using a "proven practice," professionals turn to the knowledge base in an effort to help understand the problem and deduce a solution.

Now let's apply this to a teacher with defeated and discouraged learners in their classes. Hopefully the discussion earlier in this chapter (where we focused on assessment) provided a rationale on why your students need to determine if, when, and to what extent progress was being made. Whenever our data tell us that all of our students are thriving under the current circumstances, the wisest thing for us to do is "stay the course." But, this book is premised on the fact that most teachers find that their classrooms contain some students who aren't thriving and that contributes to the student's at-riskness. In the preface we introduced the notion of competing theories on learning. When we find ourselves confronting the student who isn't succeeding as professionals, we are wise to see alternative theories as "possibilities worth considering," not as competing possibilities forcing us to choose sides.

Returning to the medical analogy, while a doctor may not be a particular fan of a certain approach and consequently may rarely make use of that particular protocol with patients that are responding well to the preferred treatment regime, the doctor might still choose to employ another less conventional approach when and if a patient isn't responding adequately to the routine regime. Other times the doctor decides to use a nontraditional approach at the outset of treatment. This often occurs when the physician spots something about the patient that suggests that he/she would do better with another approach than the one normally favored.

Retention of Learning

Retention should be the goal of all of our educational pursuits. Here we are not talking about holding children back from their age-mates, rather we are talking about the learner's ability to apply a skill or access knowledge that was taught/learned at a previous time. What influences a learner's retention of knowledge and skills?

While there are many factors that play a role in whether information or skills are retained, one of the more important factors, which is always at the teacher's command, is the match between the instructional approach and the student's dominant learning style.

Building Mental Trellises

Dick recently returned from a trip to Spain. The Spanish love flowers and the exterior of many homes are decorated with an incredible array of beautiful plants. Upon examination one can see that much of this ornamental horticulture owes its success to the trellises or frameworks that the vines and branches were once attached to. When the plants mature, it is often impossible to see the trellises, in some cases the trellises have even decayed and disappeared. At this point the plants have become self-supporting.

One way to think of our work of developing student knowledge and skills is that we are helping our charges build trellises onto which they can attach each new learning. However, the experience of many teachers, as well as many gardeners, has shown that *all* students can't and won't use the same trellis.

That brings us back to Dick's recent trip to Spain. He was looking forward to this cycling tour because while he had never been to Spain, he had taken other excursions with the tour operator, and was pleased with those experiences. But, the most important consideration was that the dates of the tour fit an open spot on his calendar. What is important for the reader to know here is that Dick is what is called a "concrete" learner. This doesn't mean he is dense, hard headed, or any of those other things his wife accuses him of, rather it means that he learns best through concrete or direct experiences.

The Tour Company, assuming that Dick (and all their customers) were abstract learners, did a wonderful job of sending material to all the participants. This material arrived through the mail. It was fair to assume that Dick and the other riders would read it, comprehend it, and have a good idea what they were about to experience.

As Jerry Conrath (1986) points out people like Dick aren't reluctant learners, considering all the money that Dick spent to enroll on the tour revealed he was anything but reluctant. However, whenever he tried to read the material, it read like so much gobble-dee-gook. Consequently, when Dick arrived at the starting point for his "Camino de Santiago," all he knew was that they were going to ride a route that Pilgrims had traveled since the 12th Century. Apparently, all this had something to do with Saint James and shaving some time off one's stay in Purgatory. The bottom line was that Dick went to Spain without a clue, or in other words, without a *mental trellis*.

In fact, on the first evening when the tour group met, Dick felt rather awkward. Some other riders were asking detailed historical and geographic questions that held no meaning for Dick. This wasn't because he didn't care, it was because he had no trellis upon which to hang this information.

Well, as it turned out Dick not only had a marvelous time but now has more than a little detailed knowledge on the geography of the Castille, Leon, and Galicia provinces. He has a sense of the flow of Spanish history from the Middle

Ages forward and a growing appreciation for some very abstract concepts—spirituality and the evolving role of the Church in the life of the Spanish people over the last 500 years. Did he learn all this on a 10-day bike trip? No, he isn't that perceptive! Yes, he did learn a lot through his experience on the trip, but, if all we know is what we personally experience, we would be awfully ignorant people.

Dick's learning *started* with the concrete experience of pedaling along on paths that had been used for centuries and visiting breathtaking Cathedrals, but that was only the beginning. For a learner like Dick, concrete experience is most helpful in building a trellis. Once that trellis was established, Dick found he was able to read the material from the tour company and hang it where it belonged on his framework. As of this writing, he has read all the material originally sent by the tour operator, several books he purchased along the way, and other works he acquired on his return.

Enough of this talk of exotic foreign travel. It is probably only making the reader jealous! Let's return to our classrooms and our defeated and discouraged learners. Students like Dick succeed best when they can build a trellis from direct or concrete experience and then augment it with more abstract material. Dick is the kind of kid who often appears disinterested in class when library or text material is used to introduce a topic. But, when a unit of study begins with a field trip, it appears he is more motivated. Conversely when abstract learners are asked to begin a unit of study with a field trip or other concrete experience, they often become uneasy. Why? When the abstract learner engages in an experience without a mental trellis to attach the experiences to, it can seem like a waste of time. These abstract learners are the kids who are constantly asking, "Why are we doing this?"

The Think and Do exercise that follows is a strategy you can use to better understand the "trellis" building process.

Think and Do Exercise—Building a Mental Trellis

1. Think of something you truly enjoy and have a certain degree of expertise with.
2. Reflect on how you first became interested in this topic or pursuit. Was it through an experience, trying something out, going someplace, doing something? Or were you stimulated by something you read or heard about?
3. Now ask the students in your class to do the same thing.
4. Have a class discussion on the results.
5. Now ask yourself: Do all my students build mental trellises in the same way and how difficult is it to initially learn and retain material without mental trellises?

The Curriculum and Instruction Battle Fields

Increasingly students of education are told that there are wars going on in the schoolhouse. No, we aren't referring here to school violence. Rather, we are talking about the great pedagogical wars raging in many elementary schools and even a few secondary schools.

The Reading and Math Wars

When it comes to literacy the battle-lines are usually drawn this way. One side (often labeled *whole language*) argues that both the skill and the motivation to develop language skills begin with experience. Children might be encouraged to sing familiar verses, write, utilizing their own vocabulary, even inventing words. The notion is to invite having fun with language, recognize all the places where it's used to help them find ways to personally connect with the need/desire to write, speak, listen, and read. Educators in this camp might argue that once the children have built a literacy trellis then they will be ready, willing and able to do the hard work of developing the precision and discipline of critical readers, proficient writers, careful listeners and persuasive speakers.

Other educators argue that reading and writing are skills that are made up of critical discrete skills that need to be taught, learned, and mastered in a pre-determined sequence if proficiency is to be attained. These folks would argue that it is those specific skills that form the trellis the learner will need as a prerequisite to the creative use of language.

In math the lingo is different, but, the battle is really quite similar. On the one hand, we find those who feel children need to master their basic number skills, develop confidence in using the standard algorithms to solve problems and achieve high levels of accuracy with their computation before they will understand the concepts. These folks might argue that only when the child has the confidence that comes from mastery of basic math skills could they understand the logic and meaning behind equations.

These teachers find themselves battling colleagues who argue that in an age of computers and calculators what is most critical is thinking with math. They are more concerned with children working through a problem and being able to explain the logic and decision making behind their strategies than coming up with a correct answer that is not fully understood by the student. To these folks an unconventional way to solve a problem is evidence of a child's development as a mathematician, which these educators feel is of greater importance than mastery of algorithms.

In Chapter 5 when we discuss the need of *belonging* we will discuss the issue of learning/teaching style at length and offer more guidance in choosing appropriate teaching strategies.

The reason for introducing this topic in Part 1, the introductory portion of the text, was to get us on the same page regarding several key factors. Specifically, we wanted to share why we feel it is so essential to begin planning instruction recognizing that students learn in different ways and that those differences must be addressed if our goal is universal success.

Why learn a skill or acquire knowledge if not to retain it? Even if you find yourself teaching in an environment marked by high-stakes testing, you will be doing yourself, your school, and your students a disservice if you allow them to believe that we are only teaching the curriculum because they are expected to know it for the exam. The cynicism that this will breed with students will create an ever-escalating motivational problem as students move through the system.

By contrast if students begin to see that each piece of learning, each skill or attribute is, in reality, one more branch on an ever evolving and more complex and beautiful trellis, we will be creating a motivational accelerator. Instead of expecting to forget or lose a skill and returning to point zero, students can begin seeing themselves as becoming ever more powerful with each additional learning.

If the goal of *retention* is for all students, then the goal of *building a conceptual framework* (a trellis) where each new item can be hung is essential for every student.

However, the process for building a mental trellis will differ from learner to learner. What we ask of you, the reader, at this point is simply this: When a strategy is introduced, don't ask yourself,

- ◆ "Do I like this?" or
- ◆ "Is this the way I'd like to learn?"

But rather, ask yourself, would this be a strategy with potential for helping *some* of my learners build a mental framework that will ultimately lead them to greater retention and excitement regarding this material?

Just as none of us wants our doctors to be wedded to a single treatment regime (regardless of its power for helping others), our students deserve to work with professional teachers who come equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to administer the proper instructional protocol at the right time for the each of the students they are working with.

References

- Stiggins, Richard J. (2000). *Student involved classroom assessment*, 3rd ed. New York:Prentice Hall.
- Knight, Tanis. (1998). *But are they learning? A common sense parents guide to assessment and grading in schools*. Portland: Assessment Training Institute.
- Conrath, Jerry. (1986). *Our other youth*. Gig Harbor, WA: Our Other Youth, Inc.
- McTighe, Jay, & Wiggins, Grant. (1998). *Understanding by design*, Alexandria: ASCD.