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# The Long and the Short of Short-Cycle Assessments

Teachers are expected to reach unattainable goals with inadequate tools. The miracle is that at times they accomplish this impossible task.

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## **What is the Background Framework for this Work?**

Professional development of teachers and improvement of their abilities have become frequent topics in the ongoing debate surrounding educational policy and reform. Schools, more than many professions, go through constant periods of change that require new training. The short-cycle assessment process came about from two approaches: the Objectives-Based Approach and Understanding by Design Model (UBD). Both approaches have a common ideology to the SCORE Process. With the focus on standards through a backward cycle, the SCORE Process promotes the essential questions in the collaborative learning community and data analysis sessions. This causes a teacher to contemplate *why* they teach instead of just *what* they teach.

## **Objectives-Based Approach**

The objectives-based system does not by itself constitute an instructional program. Rather, it is intended to assist teachers in assessing students' skill development and in locating existing curricula that are appropriate to students' strengths and weaknesses. The idea upon which objectives-based systems are based is an appealing one. It asks the question of "wouldn't teachers' jobs be easier if they could find a simple way to monitor individual children's mastery of specific objectives and had access to appropriate instructional resources for teaching those objectives?" The success of the objectives-based system rests on several key variables though; the criterion-referenced tests must be reliable indicators of skill mastery, the testing, recording, and grouping requirements must be organized well enough so that teachers can implement them, and instructional materials or activities that are genuinely effective in teaching the specific comprehension skills must be identified.

## Understanding by Design Model

Collaborative Learning (CL) is based on a process of teamwork in which students are encouraged to help each other gain a long-term understanding of important skills and concepts (Davidson, 1994). Understanding by Design (UBD) can then facilitate in improving academic outcomes within a CL setting. According to UBD pioneers Wiggins and McTighe (1998), the goal of the UBD approach is to help students retain knowledge more effectively by providing a memorable and personal learning experience. This is contrary to more traditional curriculum that tends to follow the progression of identifying objectives, implementing lesson plans, and then giving an assessment of results. Instead the UBD framework uses a “backward design process” that identifies assessments before planning learning experiences and lessons. This way the desired results can be more appropriately identified (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

The UBD model is centered on what are known as essential questions (EQs) for which simple “yes” or “no” or one word responses do not work. Instead, EQs are thought-provoking and necessitate complex answers. Within a CL setting, students can feed off of each other’s responses to explore the topic on a deeper level (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). This is one of the most efficient ways in which UBD and CL can work together to facilitate the experiential learning process.

According to Wiggins and McTighe, teachers should do whatever it takes to make it easier for students to focus on the “big picture,” helping students understand what is really important. All too often teachers spend weeks on a particular unit and when assessment time arrives the teacher finds that many students did not grasp the “big picture.” UBD asks teachers to determine what students should understand about a subject and then, working backward, develop lesson plans and assessment to help reach that goal. Wiggins and McTighe (1998) explain the benefits to this reversal as follows:

Like other design professions, such as architecture, engineering, or graphic arts, designers in education must be mindful of their audiences. Professionals in these fields are strongly client centered. The effectiveness of their designs corresponds to whether they have accomplished their goals for the end users. Clearly, students are our primary clients, given that the effectiveness of curriculum, assessment, and instructional designs is ultimately determined by their achievement of desired learning (p.7).

There are overarching EQs that span an entire year and unit EQs. At the end of each unit students must demonstrate a competent answer to the EQs through a performance-based assessment. The power of this kind of design is it causes teachers to contemplate why they teach a particular lesson and keeps them from teaching it just because they “like it.” This approach gives students the opportunity to act on their newly acquired knowledge and to show that they understand the true meaning (Davidson, 1994).

Within the Collaborative Learning context, the UBD approach helps to ensure that when students come together in groups, individual group members will make valuable contributions to the groups' understanding of key themes and ideas. By working backwards to determine desired outcomes, as well as by focusing on EQs, teachers can make the most efficient and effective use of collaboration and minimize wasted time and effort.

Finally, Professional Learning Communities offers a context for the process of SCORE. Richard Dufours' work establishes the profession of teaching as a continuation of learning within the context of improvement. Critical friends group (CFG) within school buildings has been an effective way of studying successful best practices. The SCORE Process encourages the collaboration and professional learning time with teachers to develop assessments that are common and review data to change instructional practices.

As SCORE is implemented in a building(s) and/or district, changes occur within a teacher's skill set as well as their attitudes the further along they are in the process. Many times when innovation and change begins there is a negative perception until success and understanding is acquired by the majority of the staff. The models/approaches mentioned above set a framework for the short-cycle assessment process and offer an understanding to the "big idea" behind the strategy for achievement.

## **What are Short-Cycle Assessments?**

Short-cycle assessments are tests given several times over the course of the school year with the intention of preparing students for the high-stakes test. Almost all states give a test designed to assess students on what they have learned based on the content standards that state has deemed necessary. These tests can take many different formats including written responses, multiple-choice, or a demonstration of learning.

So why the need for short-cycle assessments? Imagine taking a course in college where all the homework you did, all the presentations you gave, and all the class discussion you participated in meant nothing. The only thing that will determine your grade for that course is going to be the pencil-to-paper test given over the course of 1 week. This is daunting enough when you have a 10-week class. Now imagine a 35-week-long course. How intimidating is that?

That is what public schools are doing. All the work a student does in class does not mean anything compared to the state assessment. The student may have demonstrated mastery of a particular skill time and time again over the course of a class but if the student bubbles or fills in the wrong answer circle on the high-stakes test, as far as the state is concerned, the student is deficient in that skill.

As an administrator why would you want to wait to see how your students did on the state test? Wouldn't it make more sense for the teacher of that class to offer tests

every few weeks using the same format so that students are completely prepared for the final? This would act as a good predictor of how students are going to perform. The short-cycle assessment process is like going to a baseball game. While you are engaged in the game you watch how the innings play out. You don't just wait for the ending score; instead, you keep track of the score inning by inning. That's what short-cycle assessments are. They are written in the same format and cover the same content as the final assessment, only in smaller pieces. Suddenly that final assessment does not seem so daunting but simply the final puzzle that you've been putting pieces into all year long. Hence short-cycle assessments are a tool to prepare students for the final assessment. Some people claim this to be "teaching to the test" as though this were an educational equivalent to a curse word. If you are one of those people who feel this way, read the argument in *Teaching to the Test* (p. 121). It might convince you otherwise.

## Enduring Understanding

The purpose of the state test is to determine whether the student truly understands the concept of the skills required for that grade level. Students have become very adept at playing the game of school. How many times have you memorized the information you needed for a test long enough to sit down, spew it out, and then forget it forever? This creates an issue when that same student is expected to answer a question based on that information many months later and is unable to do so. If a student does poorly on the high-stakes test, does this mean you are a bad teacher or that you wasted your time teaching a subject? The real question you need to ask yourself is did students get an enduring understanding with the teaching method you used or were they able to play the game of school where grades become much more important than learning?

The state achievement tests require that students understand something not just that year, but also several years later. A student might have to dig deep and remember a concept from the 7th grade just to answer a question on the 10th grade assessment. The question to consider is how confident are you that students understand what you teach in class to the point that they would be able to relate this understanding several years later? This is especially important when you have a group that sometimes cannot remember math concepts from one school year to the next because of the summer layoff or who struggle to tell you the difference between homophones and homographs because they sound the same.

There will be potential roadblocks along the way. For instance, have you ever had a teacher in a grade level higher than yours come up to you to let you know that you need to teach the students "this and that" so that they can be more successful in their class? Most times your knee-jerk reaction is, "But I taught that, and taught that, and taught that?" What happened? Why can't the students do it? One very real possibility is that there is a distinct difference between teaching and learning. We can teach

everything and “cover” it in a given year, but if the students do not learn it, what is the point? One of the biggest mistakes we make as educators is that often we keep doing the same thing even if it isn’t getting us the results we want. If there is something that you know you have “taught,” but the students have not “learned,” consider doing something different—teach it in a different way, use a different method, etc. After all, Albert Einstein said it best when he said, “We cannot solve problems with the same thinking we used when we created the problems.” In other words, “We can’t expect different results if we don’t do something different.”

With these high-stakes tests the state is now saying not only do we have to teach this stuff, but the students actually have to learn it. That may sound facetious but we all know as educators that students have a funny way of determining what they will and will not understand. It comes down to the old adage of “you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make it drink.” How long do we have to hold our students’ heads underwater until they decide to take that drink? How do we get them to understand?

The SCORE Process uses a goal-setting theory embedded in the change process by directing teachers to work with the end in mind. They constantly obtain feedback so they can determine whether they are succeeding in teaching the standards successfully to their students (Locke & Latham, 1990). It is assumed that the teacher will develop a deeper understanding of standards-based assessment, use data from the standards-based assessment to monitor student performance on the short assessments, and make instructional implications in the classroom based on the data from the assessments. The assess–plan–teach process is cyclical and always evolving as teachers become more comfortable with using assessments in their instructional practice.

## The Benefits of Short-Cycle Assessments

Although we will go over most of this in far greater detail as the book goes on, here are some benefits of short-cycle assessments:

- ◆ Short-cycle assessments will help you find out exactly where each of your students fall with regards to the Content Standards in your state, and therefore better prepare them for the high-stakes test.
- ◆ Short-cycle assessments will give you information ahead of time, instead of waiting until the results of the high-stakes tests come out.
- ◆ Short-cycle assessments can show a year's growth by comparing last year's assessment scores with this year's assessment scores.
- ◆ Short-cycle assessments require an enduring understanding of the material that has been taught.
- ◆ Short-cycle assessments show teaching strengths and areas for improvement.
- ◆ Short-cycle assessments are what is best for kids—bottom line.

The last one, what is best for kids, can sometimes be a sore spot for some teachers. How can testing these kids so much be what is best for them? The simple answer to that is for a student to graduate, in many states the student must pass a graduation exam. Sure one of our main goals as teachers is to see to it students learn, but isn't the ancillary purpose from the kindergarten teacher all the way through junior high and senior year to make sure these students receive a high school diploma? Short-cycle assessments are a tool to ensure this happens more often than not.

## The Four Es

Broken down even further, short-cycle assessments give some clear advantages that we like to call the Four Es:

1. To give planned and purposeful *exposure* to the benchmarks, indicators, and formats.
2. To build resilience and *endurance* for each student to be able to (a) sit through the test and (b) work through difficult questions.
3. To develop *expertise* in each teacher's ability to ask higher-level questions, base instructional decisions for delivery on performance data, and collaborate for curricular direction across grade levels.
4. To *empower* students and their parents to become responsible decision makers for learning.

Taking these and breaking them down even further, *exposure* can be a very powerful tool. Statistics show a majority of students do better on the SAT or ACT exams when they take it a second time. Why is this? Have students become smarter between tests? Have they developed new areas of their brains unbeknownst to them previously? Is it because they have been willing to pay for the test two times and the testing company slips them an easier test? The real reason is because students have been *exposed* to the test once already and are familiar with the format and types of questions it asks. Before they might have been tripped up on the wording of the question or the format in which they have to answer it, not the actual content or skill being asked. The second time through it becomes more about the content and less about the format. Looking at exposure through a sports context, this is why coaches have their athletes participate in scrimmages or practice games. That way, they will be familiar with the athletic contest before the real one occurs. It is also why English teachers cringe when a student turns in their rough draft as their final paper. It is obvious they did not take a second look at the paper and it shows. Short-cycle assessments can be viewed as rough drafts preparing for the final draft, which is the state assessment.

To test this theory, try the *Testing Twice* (p. 123) activity. In this you will be taking a test twice, once when you are unfamiliar with the formatting, and the second time after you become more comfortable with the formatting. The idea is to see which test you feel more comfortable taking, and thus work more quickly and with greater consistency. Ask yourself if the two are related. How does this correlate to your own students?

Short-cycle assessments are written in the same format as the state test with similar vocabulary that exposes students to the point where they are no longer tripped up if a question has two parts or four. They have learned to recognize this and are merely being evaluated on their knowledge.

*Endurance* is important because it is difficult enough to get students to sit still over the course of a 30-minute class period much less for several hours over the course of a few days. Once again students are penalized for something other than their understanding of the skill. If a student begins to bottom out of their patience an hour into the assessment, all questions answered after this first hour will be affected. That is not a true measure of what a student knows.

Consider when (what time of the day, what day of the week, etc.) the assessment is given. If your assessment is given on the last day of a busy week, one of two things might happen: (a) because students have become used to the testing and its formatting, they will do better, or (b) students have become so burned out by so much testing that their brains are fried and cannot possibly give it their all. Which scenario occurs depends, of course, on the student.

Short-cycle assessments build the endurance and tolerance of students. Because they have become used to sitting still over an extended period of time to take the short-cycle assessments it is not so much of a stretch to sit for a couple of hours and take the state test. If you model your schedule to give the short-cycle assessments for

each subject area over the course of a week, students will be even more tolerant of having to do the same at test time.

*Expertise* comes in the form of the teacher's ability to relate lessons to the content standards and in asking higher-level, state-assessment-like questions. Short-cycle assessments will require the teacher to become very familiar with the state Content Standards, and the way those standards are instructed and assessed. Through writing short-cycle assessments and going over the questions in class, the teacher's expertise on how to instruct and assess will improve.

Imagine you are a teacher introducing a new lesson you have never taught before and like lots of teachers you have to teach the same class five times in a day. Your morning class is the guinea pig because you are teaching the lesson for the first time. You are bound to fumble here and there, making mistakes galore, and trying out different techniques, some which lead to dead-ends. By the time you get to the next class it is more of a dress rehearsal where you have practiced it at least once, still making some mistakes but not nearly as many, and the performance is a little more refined. The afternoon classes get the best possible education you have to offer because you have done the lesson a couple of times, all the kinks have been worked out, and you have even added some things you have learned from the other two classes.

The reason for this is because you had enough familiarity with the lesson to be at your best. You can adjust the flow to the level of the class because you are comfortable enough to do that and can push the students to a higher level of thinking because you know the lesson well enough. Your expertise is at a point that you can be at your best.

The simple fact is that teachers often have to teach skills they are not comfortable with or do not fully understand. We can't all be as all-powerful and all-knowing as students or the state expect us to be, especially elementary teachers who have to know all subject areas in a far greater range than the more secularized high school classes. Even though we often have to teach things that are not our strengths, the more familiar we become with them, the more this becomes a strength because familiarity often breeds understanding.

The same goes with a familiarity of the Content Standards in your state. As we gain deeper understanding, the easier it is to work them into the day-to-day activities of the classroom seamlessly as well as the vocabulary of the test itself. Higher level questioning is not something most people can just do cold; they have to be comfortable enough with the content in order to take it to the next level. That is what teachers creating the short-cycle assessments get from the process—a comfort with the standards.

The last and most important advantage to the short-cycle process is the *empowerment* that comes when students realize they are as responsible for their educational success as their teachers. As students begin to rack up small success after small

success from the short-cycle assessments they gain the confidence to tackle the much larger high-stakes test.

Many of the schools who use short-cycle assessments experience this same scenario; the first time students take a written portion of the test, students either leave the response blank, draw a picture, or even simply write “I don’t know.” More often than not, the reason for this is that the students don’t feel empowered to answer the question. Because they don’t understand, their first reaction is to shut down. Leaving the answer blank is much easier than trying to answer and failing—at least in their mind. When the second assessment comes around, students are writing a word or two, sometimes maybe even a fragmented sentence. It still is very poor but it is better than before. By the time the fourth assessment is given students have become empowered in the process enough to attempt writing a legitimate answer. They feel confident enough to try even if they are not successful. They have become empowered enough in their learning to take a chance.

Because teachers have communicated the results of the short-cycle assessments to parents and what their particular student needs to do to improve, parents also are given a sense of empowerment to help where they see fit. It is no longer just up to the teacher to see that the student passes—the parent also may take a larger role.

## **The Short of Why**

Short-cycle assessments give students the practice and teachers the position to ensure success on the state assessment, which in most cases signifies learning. Just like a football coach trying to defeat another team, the coach familiarizes himself with the opponents, looks at film of past games, reads scouting reports, and teaches his players how to handle adversity. Success is not coincidental. It is through this practice that victory comes on game night, not just hoping the night of the game everyone can pull it all together. It becomes a very intentional act.

## **The Short Version of the Proof**

The study completed with Miami University, Oxford, Ohio and Dr. Susan Lang titled, *An Evaluation Study of Short-Cycle Assessments: An Instructional Process* evaluated the Literacy Curriculum Alignment Process (LCAP), presently titled SCORE. The study was the foundation of this book. Dr. Lang's evaluation study determined if the school districts that adopted the process showed improvement on measures for the Ohio Academic Content Standards after 2 years. LCAP is defined as an intensive literacy-based professional development program. The process was developed to introduce principals and their leadership teams to an array of instructional tools, including the backwards-building curriculum from standards, curriculum alignment, mapping, assessment practices, and data analysis protocols. The primary focus of the process is to work with professional learning communities to design a

formative assessment program that monitors student progress towards the mastery of literacy and numeracy standards.

This study examined the SCORE Process using an objectives-based evaluation model. A series of questions were proposed and the achievement was gathered through both qualitative (proximate) and quantitative (distal) methods. The quantitative findings indicate an improvement on the Ohio standardized tests in fourth and sixth grades in 53 buildings of 20 Ohio public school districts. The qualitative data were generated through a series of questions posed to respondents in a survey through focus groups. Emergent themes were prevalent in the analysis of surveys, feedback forms, and focus groups. Themes included how teachers learn of standards and state tests; teacher perception for the rationale for the short-cycle assessments and critical thinking; teachers' and students' preparation and anxiety level for the tests; instruction/curriculum changes because of test performance; teachers' accounts of needing reflection and collaboration time; teacher perception of new educational initiatives with a short-term fix; and teacher utilization of data analysis. Several positive changes in perception regarding the teachers' views of standard-based assessment were found.

## Theoretical Base

Educational research must develop case knowledge that examines teachers' actions and decisions in different contexts and with diverse kinds of learners (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Reformers can construct knowledge with teachers who help develop these cases of practice and interpret data from detailed data of their students' performance. Research that engages teachers improves the responsiveness of research to realities of teaching while developing the kind of thinking teachers must use to evaluate information continually about students, practice, and instructional effects. *This research study offers information related to teacher responsiveness to short-cycle assessment data to help drive improved instructional practices affecting student achievement.*

Professional development and teacher involvement in assessment design are important components. *The primary goal is to change what and how teachers teach rather than to measure performance for accountability purposes.* A program's theory of change identifies "program resources, program activities and intended program outcomes and specifies a chain of causal assumptions linking program resources, activities, and intermediate outcomes, and ultimate goals" (Wholey, 1987, p. 78).

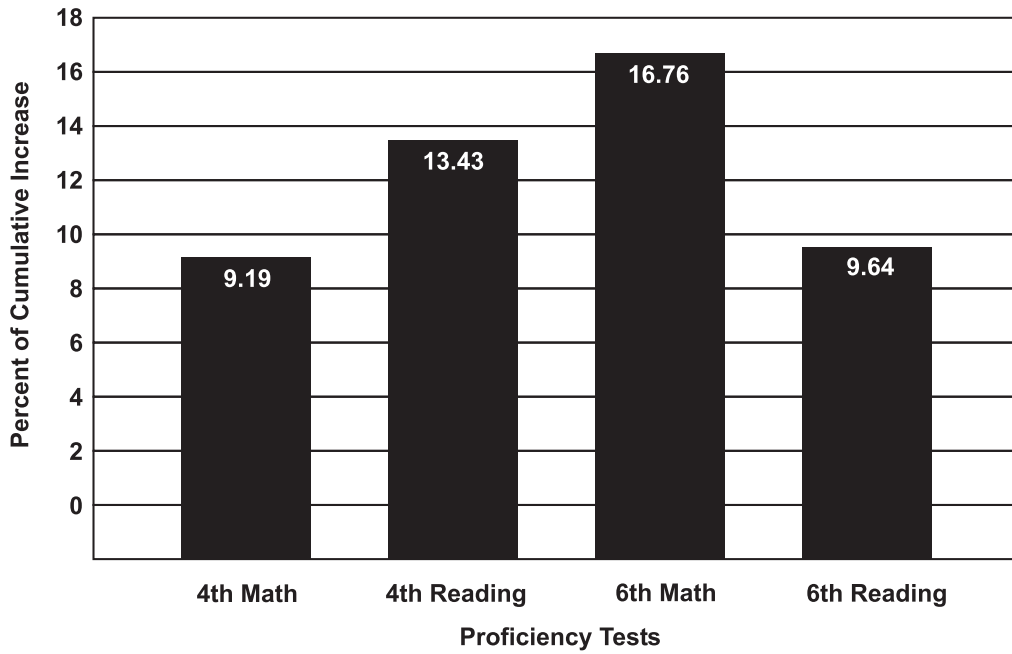
## Methodological Approach

The evaluation study involved collecting 20 districts' achievement scores from 1999 to 2004 and comparing the scores of the same grade level of students. This provided information on the impact of the program but did not look at individual student performance. Data were analyzed regarding the impact of the SCORE

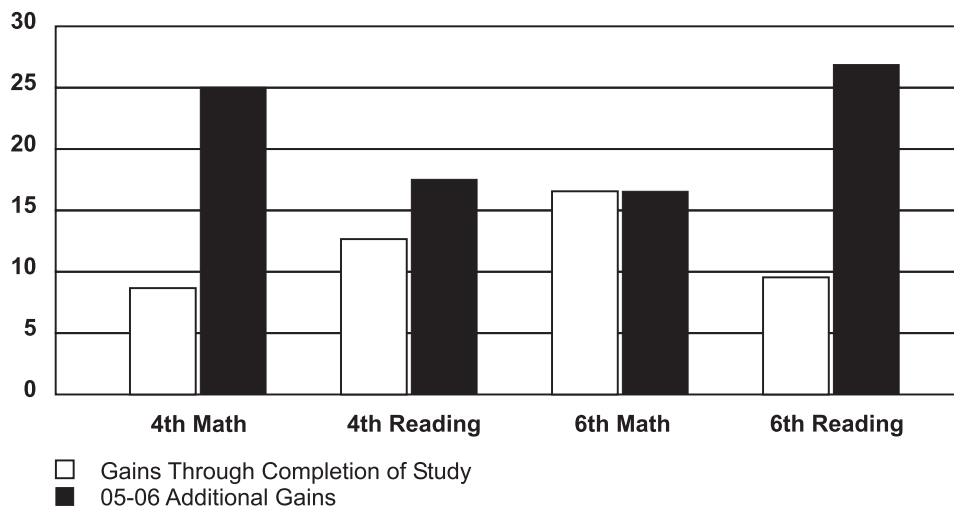
Process on student achievement. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 represent the average test gains made in the districts in the 4th and 6th grades and the year following the completion of the study the additional gains.

**Figure 1.1 Average Overall Gains**

Proficiency Test Score Progress Since LCAP Inception



**Figure 1.2 Comparison Study Gains**



Did the SCORE Process change teacher perceptions and practices regarding standards-based assessment? The chart below represents the specific questions asked so as to gain an understanding of teachers' perceptions. Surveys, feedback forms and focus groups were completed and analyzed. Figure 1.3 identifies the key themes that came from the data.

**Figure 1.3 Evaluation Model Summary on Outcomes**

<i>Data Sources</i>	<i>Emerging Themes</i>	<i>Impact on Decision Making for Future SCORE Work</i>
"Where Are We?" Surveys	1. How teachers learn of standards and state tests.	Early exposure to the process is desired.
Feedback Forms	2. Teacher perception for the rationale for the short cycle assessments and critical thinking.	Same as #1
Focus Groups	3. Teachers' and students' preparation and anxiety level for the tests.	Practice builds confidence and endurance.
All 3 sources	4. Instruction/curriculum changes due to test performance.	Engaging teachers in the process and providing collaboration time to make instructional changes.
All 3 sources	5. Teachers' accounts of needing reflection and collaboration time.	Building administrators need to provide time for data analysis.
All 3 sources	6. Teacher perception of new educational initiatives with a short-term fix.	Fewer initiatives in the building, and time to learn and practice new strategies.
All 3 sources	7. Teacher utilization of data analysis.	Practice in the process and leadership in providing the guidance and resources for use of data.