

CHAPTER 1

The Evolution of Assessment

Educational reform in the past decade has felt like a roller coaster ride for most teachers and schools. Schools reflect the changes that are occurring more broadly in society, and there seems to be no end to the changes (economic, cultural, political, and socioeconomic) that schools are expected to keep up with, or even lead. As Hargreaves (1994) reminds us, “Few people want to do much about the economy, but everyone—politicians, the media, and the public alike—wants to do something about education” (p. 17). The role of education is hotly debated in boardrooms, living rooms, and staff rooms.

Teachers and administrators are caught in the middle of what often appear to be conflicting and countervailing demands, struggling to maintain their balance. They are expected to navigate their passage through the unrest and uncertainty about how schools should be organized, what should be taught, how it should be taught, and how assessment should occur. At the same time, they are expected to continue to exert their professional influence by staying abreast of advances in understanding of human learning and of effective schools. The prospects are daunting, but the possibilities are compelling.

For a long time, extended education was available only to a small elite group. Schools were designed to provide the minimum education required for employment and engagement in the broader culture. For most students, this meant attending school long enough to learn the 3Rs and get a minimal understanding of the society in which they lived. Only a few students continued on to secondary school and beyond. Over time, as societies have changed, schools have evolved progressively from serving this elite group, to working with the larger numbers and wider aspirations of a middle class, to dealing with the responsibility for educating all young people.

For most of the 20th century, the conception of learning was a behaviorist one that focused on learning specific, discrete skills and facts in a

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hierarchical sequence. Schools were charged with their transmission to students. Over time, these theories have been challenged by a social constructivist view of learning that emphasizes learning as a cognitive process that is shaped by prior knowledge and cultural perspectives. Teachers are expected to attend both to the demands of a fixed school curriculum generated by cultural/societal demands and to the needs of individual children with varied understandings, backgrounds, and interests who make up a class. They are caught between an awareness that young people construct their own view of the world through ideas that have some meaning for them and the expectations of the social milieu in which they live (Katz, Earl, & Olsen, 2001).

Traditionally, assessment and tests or examinations were synonymous, and their role was clear and consistent with the purposes of schooling—testing of segmented competencies and knowledge from the school curriculum as a way of sorting students into groups and deciding about future schooling. Assessment was based on the “concordance” or “fidelity” of the students’ responses to the material that was delivered. As we come to know more about how learning happens, assessment takes on a different sheen. In our work, we have found that teachers are uneasy about having a single purpose for assessment. They are increasingly aware that assessment has multiple purposes and that they need a toolbox full of assessment ideas to address them all.

“The Case of Standards-Based Assessment”

In our book, *Learning to Change*, Andy Hargreaves and I wrote about how middle school teachers were responding to mandated changes in curriculum and assessment. In this longitudinal study, we followed 29 teachers from four different school districts who were actively engaged in efforts to incorporate the changes into their practices. When it came to assessment, they were confused, frustrated, and anxious. They told us that assessment was the hardest part of their work and gave us vivid examples of the inconsistencies and contradictions that they were facing.

We are having trouble because the marks don't mesh with the standards-based report card. I don't know how to relate them.

We're supposed to be teaching to the standards and helping kids learn how to learn. But then they have the large-scale tests. What does the curriculum have to do with common testing?

What about the students who don't get it? There is so much in the curriculum, I can't stop and work with them but that's my job, isn't it?

The high school mathematics department would like to issue a standardized test to all the incoming students. It makes me think about what I've been doing all year. I send the kids to them with detailed reports based on the standards. I talk about integers and decimals and geometry. What are they going to do with those reports?

These teachers were struggling with the paradox of classroom assessment. It does have multiple purposes. As Wilson (1996) describes it, assessment must satisfy many goals, such as providing feedback to students, offering diagnostic information for the teacher to use, providing summary information for record keeping, proffering evidence for reports, and directing efforts at curriculum and instructional adaptations. There is no single activity called "classroom assessment," and inherent tensions exist among the different purposes that are not trivial. Contradictions in classroom assessment processes are unavoidable. The challenge that these teachers were facing was how to untangle the issues that are embedded in these tensions and formulate plans that honor the complexity of the assessment process, in ways that made sense to them.

Defining the Future

Navigating these troubled waters requires more than tinkering with practice. It means that teachers and administrators are having to rethink their beliefs about issues as lofty as "What are schools for?" "Whom do schools serve?" and "What is our professional role in creating the schools we need?"

Hedley Beare (2001), an Australian researcher, identified the following three categories of futures for education and for societies as a whole:

- *Possible futures*—things that could happen, although many of them are unlikely
- *Probable futures*—things that probably will happen, unless something is done to turn events around
- *Preferred futures*—things that you prefer to have happen and/or that you would like to happen

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He also issued a challenge to educators everywhere when he stated that it is possible to take deliberate actions to maximize the chance of achieving preferred futures—for young people, for the teaching profession, for schools, and for societies. We each need to take the time to decide what it is that we believe education is for and what role assessment should play: not because someone tells us, or the rules dictate, but because we believe it is right and just. Once we have an image of the future we prefer, getting there is possible. It may be difficult; we may have to change, to learn, to live in dissonance, and to stand firm in our beliefs. But it is possible.

My preferred future is a world in which young people not only possess competence and confidence in a broad range of areas, but also the tools to adapt to new knowledge as it comes along, and the dispositions to function wisely and with civility in a fast-paced and unpredictable world. I also have an image of how assessment fits in this preferred future. I described it first in an earlier book about classroom assessment (Earl & Cousins, 1995) as follows:

I can imagine a day, in the not too distant future, when assessment and evaluation are not viewed with foreboding and terror; not separated from teaching and learning; not used to punish or prohibit access to important learning; and not seen as private, mystical ceremonies. Instead, assessment and teaching/learning will be reciprocal, each contributing to the other in ways that enhance both. Assessment will reveal not only what students know and understand, but will also capture how those new learnings came about and will provide a range in variety and quality of work that show the depth, breadth and growth of each student's thinking. This wealth of information will, in its turn, be used to provoke further learning and focused instruction. (p. 57)

In the rest of this volume, I offer ideas, suggestions, and images to illustrate the potential of realizing this preferred future.

Ideas for Follow-Up

1. How comfortable are you with your current approach to classroom assessment? What questions do you have about what you are doing?
2. What is your preferred future for education and for assessment? What is the probable future, given how things are now?