Principles of assessment.

by Paul Gathercoal

Assessment of students is the most popular and arbitrary activity that teachers perform. It is the teacher's responsibility to give a truthful and accurate assessment of students' academic performance. Students and teachers should understand the link among assessment, evaluation and reporting.

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Assessment is probably the most arbitrary and idiosyncratic thing that teachers do. In fact, there may be as many assessment practices as there are teachers. Some teachers administer tests and assign papers; others invite performances and award grades, write comments, or talk with students about their performance; still others appear to read the minds of their students and develop elaborate systems for growth and measurement. Equally as arbitrary are the ways teachers communicate their assessments to students and their parents or caregivers, to school counselors, future teachers, future employers, and local politicians.

As idiosyncratic as these practices are, however, they do have some common ground. All assessment practices are based on the teacher's perception of the student, the form and content of the course, and the intended outcomes of the course of study. And it is generally accepted that teachers are obliged to convey individual student assessments that are accurate and truthful statements about the student's academic achievement.

In order to divine the truth and report accurately about student academic achievement, teachers necessarily divorce the report (the grade or the comment) from curriculum and implementation (the teaching strategies used in class, the course content, and the methodologies used for assessment and reporting). The need for such a separation between the curriculum and its implementation and the reporting of student academic achievement is tacitly understood. Our society silently concurs that teachers operate on a number of assumptions regarding assessment, evaluation, and reporting; teachers must assume that (a) the course they are teaching is politically correct, (b) their teaching strategies are educationally sound, (c) their intended outcomes are achievable by all students in the class, and (d) the reported student assessments accurately depict the student's academic achievement at the time. These assumptions are generally shared throughout our society.

Intrinsic Links between Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting

Teachers have a professional, ethical, and legal responsibility to convey accurately and truthfully their knowledge about their students' academic achievement. However, accuracy and truth about such achievement are often confounded by intrinsic links between assessment, evaluation, and reporting.

Although many teachers think of assessment, evaluation, and reporting as separate educational practices, they are, in fact, inseparable. Further, each of these terms, now bereft of its broader meaning as originally used in education, has come to have only one limited meaning. For example, the ways in which reporting, assessment, and evaluation can be used to reveal important information about students have been lost. Now a report is simply a grade, an assessment a test, and evaluation a "witch hunt." These words can be considered "iconic metaphors," narrow terms that once had a much broader meaning. This tendency to think of each term unrelated to the other and in its most narrow sense is abetted by the political call for greater accountability in education, which, in particular, pries evaluation away from its traditional links with assessment and reporting.

Evaluation is the process of determining the effectiveness of an educator, a course, unit of work, or particular teaching strategy. As part of this process, however, value judgments are based on information derived from student assessments. By determining students' academic achievements and the significance of these achievements, educators make decisions about future learning experiences for their students. Thus, because assessments of students' academic achievements are used to develop curriculum and teaching/learning strategies, it can be argued that evaluation and assessment are partners in determining course content, structure, and strategies for instruction. Together, they act as a compass for guiding the course toward its ultimate aim and the lesson toward its objective. This intrinsic link between evaluation and assessment can skew truth and accuracy in student assessments because teachers--on some level of awareness--know that their student assessments and academic reports are influenced by common perceptions of the curriculum and how it should be implemented.

Reporting is also intrinsically linked with assessment and evaluation, and its close association with the two can confound the assessment process. Ostensibly, reporting provides information about a student's academic

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achievement and affects the student's future educational and employment opportunities by giving that information to future employers and scholastic institutions. In fact, however, reporting also indirectly provides feedback that administrators use to make decisions about the teacher and the course of study. The report can affect future levels of student participation, resource allocation, and perceived need for improving curriculum and instruction. It is this secondary, albeit indirect, function of reporting that confounds the truth and accuracy about students' academic achievement. The question can always be asked, "Is it the student who fails the course or the course that fails the student?" Given the assumptions stated earlier, society tends to agree with the response, "It's the student who fails the course." Nonetheless, there is a growing tide of criticism that suggests that, at least for minorities, it's the course that failed the student.

Even on a broader cultural scale, it seems that the language of reporting has taken on a life of its own. Much of the language that teachers use to convey student assessment has lost its historical perspective and simply exists in the form of iconic metaphors that represent degrees of success or failure. The "advanced technology" used for reporting student assessments--such as electronic grading programs--has contributed greatly to the development and perpetuation of these iconic metaphors. Sadly, many of our students have bought into these metaphors and readily attach them to their self-concept, wearing them proudly or shamefully.

To cite an example from my own experience regarding such metaphors, I am reminded of my son's seventh-grade math report, a computer-generated slip of paper, that, on one occasion, indicated he had earned an 86 percent and his grade was a B. The parent signature space at the bottom of the paper implicitly directed me to sign the paper and send it back to school. I dutifully signed the paper and attached my own report: "Isn't it fantastic that all the intricacies of mathematics and all the complexities of the individual can be quantified and summed up in a single letter." Needless to say, I received an invitation to a meeting. As a result of the meeting, the teacher no longer sent slips of paper home to me, but instead she gave them to my son, who valued the information; she also set up regular parent-teacher meetings where I could peruse the curriculum and its implementation and view my son's work in math.

Another example of grades as iconic metaphors is the four-digit G.P.A. (grade point average). There is at least one institution of higher learning in America that will not allow students into a professional program if a student's G.P.A. is below a 2.500. That means that if a student has a 2.499 G.P.A., she or he will not be allowed into the program; no appeal exists, other than through the court system. A student could conceivably be denied admittance into the program because she or he had missed one multiple choice question on an exam--the difference between 2.499 and 2.500. It is a painful commentary on American education when students can offer a four-digit number as a response to the question, "How are you doing in school?"

The language that teachers use to report student academic achievements skews and biases accuracy and truth because that language is derived from the course outcomes and the goals of the course of study. As a result, reporting is integrally connected to the course content, structure, and the strategies that teachers use to help students achieve the outcomes and goals of the course. It can be argued then that reporting is intrinsically linked to evaluation and assessment, because, as stated, evaluation and assessment function as a compass helping the teacher plan curriculum and implementation that will determine, and help students to achieve, the outcomes and goals of the course. And these, in turn, become the basis for the iconic metaphors educators use to report student assessments.

The problems are complex, and every teacher has wrestled with the dilemmas of assessment, evaluation, and reporting. Maybe we need to rethink the paradigm of assessment. Rather than considering assessment in isolation, teachers may be better served to think of assessment, evaluation, and reporting together, parts of a cycle that provides information about individual students, the instructor, the course of study, and the educational environment. When these three processes are perceived in this way, teachers tend to remain flexible and open to negotiation. It is a task shared by students, parents and caregivers, educators, administrators, politicians, and concerned community members, who should all seek to improve the learning process.

Teachers, however, still have a legal, ethical, and professional responsibility to communicate accurate student assessments to a wider concerned audience. Given this responsibility, it is probably wise to base assessment, evaluation, and reporting practices on sound educational principles that reflect and dignify the student's academic achievement.

The following is a tentative list of principles concerning assessment, evaluation, and reporting. As incomplete as this list may be, however, it challenges many current assessment practices and invites educators to think holistically about assessment, evaluation, and reporting.

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* Focus on learning and academic achievement. Use assessment practices that contribute to students' learning. Where appropriate, it is important to separate behavior issues (such as being late for class, handing in late assignments, or talking out of turn) from learning and achievement. Instead, encourage students to do their best work and use assignments and class participation as opportunities for students to display the new skills and understanding they are acquiring. Be aware of differing learning styles, rates, and cultures and provide opportunities for all students to document their academic achievement.

* Provide for equal opportunity. Ensure that student assessment practices are inclusive of class, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. If a student cannot make it to class, provide him or her with a make-up assignment that covers the same material. When forming study groups, ensure that all students have the opportunity to participate. Practice affirmative action when necessary. For example, considerable research shows that girls do not get hands-on use of video equipment because boys tend to dominate the technological aspects of video production. Form all-girl production groups and give the girls sufficient notice about dressing appropriately for the rigors of video production.

* Make sure that assessment practices and the values of the discipline are congruent. Scholarship is important, and assessment, evaluation, and reporting should reflect the value that schools, colleges, departments, and faculty place on learning in every discipline. In other words, certain standards should be set, and educators should avoid student assessment practices that are based on improvement and/or effort. Who wants to have an appendix removed by a surgeon who got an A in anatomy for "trying real hard?" Also, avoid "extra credit." Extra credit diminishes the values of the course by implying there are greater rewards for those who do more; it also reeks of inequity. Instead, provide enrichment activities for everyone. Establish acceptable standards for civility and scholarship and teach to those standards.

* Recognize limitations. All assessment, evaluation, and reporting practices will have limitations; acknowledge them as they arise and, when appropriate, spell them out in your course syllabus. (For example, tell students whether they will be penalized for not meeting deadlines.) This is valuable information to students who may choose to take a different course or redesign their study strategies based on the acknowledged limitations. However, be aware that serving notice in the syllabus does not allow you to grade down for behavior or attitude problems. Should you choose to do that, however, you must alert future employers and scholastic institutions to the fact that the grade is inclusive of behavior and attitude as well as academic achievement; simply stating that such a grading policy exists in the class does not achieve this purpose. If behavior and attitude are big concerns for the teacher, he or she should use a narrative report; never try to communicate these concerns through academic grades.

* Be supportive of relationships. Highly competitive assessment practices tend to adversely affect relationships. Teachers should promote cooperation and respect in the classroom. Suggest peer coaching for those with academic problems. When appropriate, involve the community as an educational resource and involve everyone in discussions on assessment, evaluation, and reporting. Be flexible at the level of principles, balancing the rights of the individual and the rights and interests of the rest of society, and communicate clearly the principles on which you are operating.

* View the student as an active participant in the assessment process. Invite and value self-assessments and act on them as bases for assessment, evaluation, and reporting. When appropriate, allow students the opportunity to redeem their work. Students might be encouraged to share their assigned work with each other during the first part of class, allowing them to do a quick self-assessment. Then students can decide whether they need to redo the assignment or it is truly their best work, ready for the scrutiny of the teacher. Such a practice implies that there is no grade penalty for late papers (an approach that may not be appropriate for some classes, for example, journalism).

* Report student assessments in a consistent and meaningful way. The report should communicate to a wider audience the student's academic achievement, be consistent with the assessment practices employed, and be meaningful to all who need to know. There is legal precedent for adhering to this principle. As I have pointed out (Gathercoal 1993), "educators' gracing practices may be putting in jeopardy students' Fourteenth Amendment rights of liberty. . . . A student's liberty must not hinge on what the [teacher] thinks the [report] means, but what the widespread consensus of those who interpret the [report] think it means" (139). Hence, reporting should be comprehensive and should convey an accurate assessment of academic achievement to all those who are concerned with the students' future.

Conclusion

By acknowledging intrinsic links between assessment, evaluation, and reporting, educators can get on with the process of education. And when guided by principles of assessment such as those listed here, teachers will

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uncover a way to reconcile the epistemological bases for their assessment practices and the modern day metaphors our society attaches to them. Our society will find itself in a "win/win" situation when teachers and students learn to value assessment, evaluation, and reporting as worthwhile experiences and as important rites of passage in the continuum of life-long learning.

REFERENCE

Gathercoal, F J. 1993. Judicious discipline. 3rd. ed. San Francisco: Caddo Gap Press.

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