Chapter 14

Assessment Shouldn’t Be a Pay–Per–View Activity: Offering Classroom Teachers Authentic Student–Centered Assessment Activities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter begins with a consideration of the state of school-based assessments as an unavoidable consequence of the contemporary societal emphasis on accountability and curricular prescriptions at the state and national level in the United States of America. Additionally, the authors comment upon the potential inaccuracies inescapable in large scale, high-stakes, standardized assessment instruments, especially when such instruments are turned to the task of evaluation—whether norm- or criterion-referenced—in a teaching and learning engagement. Likewise, the chapter concludes with suggestions and templates (elaborately configured with specific activities and assessment rubrics included) to support teachers who want to develop their own, rigorous, valid, and reliable assessments instruments embedded seamlessly in student-centered learning activities, and that accommodate the reality of literacy as a culturally situated behavior that, for contemporary learners, includes all manner of meaning-making in all manner of modalities from the pencil and paper to the purely electronic (and potentially wordless, at times) video- or audio-based.

INTRODUCTION

There are few more polarizing topics in education today in the United States than those dealing with both standardized curricula and standardized accountability measures, particularly standardized tests as measures of student achievement, teacher quality and effectiveness, and accountability of schools themselves (Ravitch, 2001). Additionally, in a time of heightened regulatory and legislative attention to

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schools as sites of social reproduction and worker preparation (Apple, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2011; Giroux, 2015), many companies have sought to turn the continuing emphasis on supposed accountability into dollars. Test-making, test-taking, test-prepping, and test-practicing are all drawing, like moths to the flame, edupreneurs and established companies alike because of the potential for profit. Virginia alone stands to spend millions on testing materials in 2016-2017, and in 2012, Ujifusa (2012) estimated that nationally states would spend approximately 1.7 billion dollars in 2012-2013. Factoring in college and university admissions tests such as the SAT, the ACT, the GRE, the LSAT, and the MCAT, societal costs for tests ostensibly purchased to measure student achievement and competence rise into the stratosphere. And while the primary purpose of this work is not to comment specifically on the validity (questionable as it is) of such practices, or even those who advocate for such measures, we have become increasingly concerned—as teachers and professional educators involved with teacher preparation—about the side effects that these initiatives seem inescapably to create, the negative side effects involving everything from increased cynicism among teachers and administrators to the reduced reading comprehension in learners, and to lost opportunities for society.

Most specifically, we are distressed with the glaring misuse of standardized assessment instruments in service to high-stakes evaluation—often with no other performance measure in place—and that are increasingly used to evaluate everything from individual teachers to whole school systems. Too often, when such misuse occurs, those outside of the system or outside of the entity being evaluated are led to believe that these one-time, one-size-fits-all instruments do capture the learning of the individual student, or the value and overall quality of the individual teacher, the individual program, the specific school, or even the overall educational system. Not only are such approaches to evaluation a misuse of what is inherently more of an assessment instrument than an evaluative one, such approaches are incredibly poor practice (Popham, 2010; Duckor, 2014). Indeed, such approaches lead to even poorer policy at every possible administrative and bureaucratic level. We agree completely with Linda Darling-Hammond, a noted author in the field and an advisor to the 2008 Obama campaign, who has been repeatedly quoted as follows: “high-stakes testing has failed wherever it has been tried” (Kohn, 2000, p. 26). However, as a matter of consequence, and no doubt motivated in part by teachers’ desire to remain employed, such instruments have crept (or been shoved) into virtually every elementary and secondary classroom in the country (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002). Unfortunately, these same assessment instruments are manifestly not being adopted by teachers for utilitarian reasons, as would be the case if such instruments offered better information or even more information about what students have learned. Additionally, such instruments are certainly not being adopted because they offer opportunities for more meaningful learning experiences. No, with the immense funding pressure being tied to the use of such instruments growing greater all the time, from the Bush era (and now discredited) Reading First Initiative (Yatvin, 2002; Gamse, Jacob, Horst, Boulay, & Unlu, 2008) to Arne Duncan’s signature initiative, the so called Race to the Top (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) to current legislative efforts being promoted under the banner of the Every Student Succeeds Act (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2016), such instruments have become the norm. Clearly, this normalization of testing-performance-as-sanctified-truth has nothing to do with effective practice or the design of an efficacious learning environment (Appropriate Use of High-Stakes Testing, ND). Unfortunately, most administrators and classroom teachers have little time and less inclination to counter the pressure to adopt such instruments.

The choice is abundantly clear in most settings: adopt the mandated instrument, at whatever cost and for whatever gain to a for-profit entity, or face drastic funding reductions (at the state and local level). Indeed, the intent seems almost worthy of conspiracy theory as teachers are left with little opportunity (