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Educational assessment, both in the United Kingdom and the United States, increasingly focuses on uniform educational standards and accountability for students and teachers in order to meet common educational standards. Small but growing groups of researchers are now turning their attention to assessment embedded in the context of the classroom (Stiggins, 2001a; Shepard, 2001). Studies of classroom-based assessment frequently open with salvos aimed at the negative effects large-scale testing programs (Wiggins, 1993; Kohn, 2000). Ruth Dann does not waste words discussing the merits of accountability assessment. While acknowledging teachers' responsibilities in preparing students for external standards, she avoids complaining about the "lemons" of large-scale standardized testing and instead turns her attention to making lemonade by emphasizing the "... capacity to transform any educational encounter into a valuable learning experience" (p. 3). She utilizes the framework of accountability assessment, but transforms the intent in order to serve learning rather than merely evaluating it.

Assessment of student learning appears, on the surface, to be an objective, clearly definable and scientific process. One need only determine the standards of achievement, outline the objectives necessary in acquiring

these standards, and then create the tests to determine the acquisition of objectives. In other words, educators must create “tests worth taking” and teachers will align their classrooms to the agreed upon standards (Resnick & Resnick, 1989). The current push for standards-based educational reform in England and the United States is predicated on the assumption that large-scale testing paired with performance-based consequences will improve student learning.

While standards-based assessment may tell us how many students can hurdle the bar we set for them, it contributes little to the strategies for improving teaching and learning in the classroom. In the first two chapters of *Promoting Assessment as Learning: Improving the Learning Process*, Ruth Dann develops the idea that teachers may use accountability assessment for the purpose of improving student learning outcomes. She acknowledges the necessity of holding students and teachers to similar standards, but emphasizes the limitations of reducing the educational process to the constraints inherent in the tests of achievement.

Two visions of education are at the heart of Ruth Dann’s argument. In the first, large-scale standardized assessment most closely follows the behaviorist or “objectives” model in assuming that specific “objectives and targets may be established and used to frame learning” (p. 13). This model assumes that we can summarize well-defined content areas into clear objectives presented to students in a linear fashion and assessed through objective measures. Dann terms this assumption the “achievement agenda” (p.21).

The second vision of education combines two models of education: the “social constructivist” and “self-regulatory” models. The first focuses on the individual learner within the social context of the classroom (“social constructivist” model). In the second, assessment provides feedback to the learners and their peers so they may be better equipped to aid each other and themselves in improving their understanding of the curriculum (“self-regulatory” model). Dann describes the orientation of these two models as a “learning agenda.” This orientation acknowledges the centrality of the learner in the educational experience.

Woven throughout the text are examples of the summative and formative purposes of assessment. In Chapter 3, she defines large-scale assessment as focusing on summative assessment or knowledge as a product acquired after a period of learning. In contrast, formative assessment involves learning within the context of acquisition and during the process of learning. It is within this context that teachers and students can effectively

use assessment data to improve learning.

The difficulty with formative assessment is that each student acquires knowledge uniquely, not necessarily within a lock-step hierarchy prescribed by external standards. Especially in the early grades, students learn and develop at widely differing rates. This demands that teachers apply their own intuition and awareness of the diversity of learning styles within the assessment process. Dann points out that while large-scale evaluation relies exclusively on objective measurement, intuition and subjectivity have a valid role in the dynamic interplay of classroom-based assessment.

Framing classroom-based assessment as both an art and a science is not a new idea. Scates (1938, 1943) described the assessment environment in which teachers draw upon recurrent interactions and observations to form picture of learning. According to Scates (1943) a scientist is “concerned with abstracting a specific element out of a complex...” while the “...teacher’s concern is just the opposite. He is working with variable individuals to build a variable product” (p. 3).

Teachers evaluate students using assessment data, repeated observations, and an understanding of student variability. Test scores inform teachers’ professional judgments, but other sources of information also play a role in evaluating students. Why would we assume otherwise? If doctors spent as much time in assessing their patients as teachers spend assessing students, would we assume a single external test could do a better job at diagnosing the clients’ needs than the professional? Doctors certainly rely on external tests in the process of evaluation, but they provide the interpretation, diagnosis and intervention. For teachers the situation is reversed: their opportunities to observe, assess and evaluate their students may be discounted and a single external assessment used to determine high-stakes educational outcomes. In a recent example in the state of Florida, over 30,000 students failed the 3rd grade language arts assessment resulting in recommendations for grade retention (Farrington, August 24th, 2003). In determining which students to retain, a single test determined the outcome, nullifying the teachers’ role in evaluating the students.

The first developer of standardized tests, Alfred Binet, also recognized the unique opportunity of teachers to repeatedly evaluate their students. He commented that teachers’ evaluations were “based upon long observation, continued during weeks and months...” and recognized the benefits of repeated observations:

... they are numerous, diverse, and when needful they correct one another. Herein lies the incontestable superiority of

observation over the test; the latter is an experiment; moreover a short experiment, which, therefore, contains a certain element of chance. (Binet & Simon, 1916; p. 311).

Binet's recognition of the superiority of "observation over the test" reflects a position rarely articulated in discussions about assessment. Stiggins (2001a) suggests that in the years since Binet expressed his opinion, teachers' assessment competence has decreased due to lack of training in valid classroom-based assessment procedures.

Dann attempts to shift the emphasis back to the classroom by putting forward an agenda for co-opting the culture of national assessment to support the learning environment in the classroom. In Chapter 4, she tactfully defines this process as a "creative reinterpretation of policy directives and guidance in the midst of severe regulatory pressures" (p. 48) and explains the limitations of high stakes testing on the improvement of classroom learning. Bolstering her explanation, the author presents a small study in which eleven teachers, in partnership with Keele University in England, developed strategies to improve student performance on national tests while creating a learner-centered classroom environment. She suggests teachers create opportunities for students to revisit important concepts related to curriculum standards ("reminder opportunities"), increase student fluency in key tasks ("repetition opportunities"), and generalize student knowledge to new contexts ("recontextualising opportunities") (p. 70). Teachers must also help students link their knowledge together through problem-solving tasks, discussion, and concept mapping ("reconceptualising opportunities"). Finally, teachers should encourage students to think about their own learning through self-assessment ("reflection opportunities") (p. 71).

Dann then expands upon the theme of self-assessment in Chapter 5. She presents a case study supporting her premise that student involvement in the assessment process reframes testing as a method of dialogue rather than a summary of achievement. Creating dialogue, however, requires teachers to listen to student understanding and motivation rather than to determine the "correctness" of their responses. Teachers who participated in this study found that their students' perceptions of achievement often had more to do with their own educational histories than with the criteria emphasized by the teacher. The impact of grading also played an important role in students' perceptions of achievement. Discussions between students and teachers regarding achievement often boiled down to the grade assigned to a classroom product. Such negotiation between teachers and students regarding grades adds a level of complexity to discussions of classroom

learning that must be addressed for self-assessment to serve purely learning-oriented goals.

While introducing the issue of evaluation for learning and grading, Dann does not provide an opinion as to how teachers should address these potentially conflicting purposes of assessment. Others have tackled this thorny issue more directly and suggested that meeting course requirements (e.g. turning papers in on time) and the acquisition of knowledge should be graded separately (Siggins, 2001b).

Utilizing the two assessment perspectives developed throughout the book, Dann synthesizes a framework that enables teachers to balance measuring student performance and influencing student learning. In Chapter 6, she points out that teachers must go beyond simply teaching students to interpret their assessment data; they must also help students maintain their confidence and motivation as learners. Our current assessment culture emphasizes what is wrong with student performance. Teachers must learn to emphasize and encourage what is right with it.

Once again, by introducing the relationship between assessment and motivation, the author introduces an aspect to testing that receives too little attention. Student motivation represents the greatest source of “content-irrelevant variance” during testing. I would speculate that test score improvement on high-stakes tests has more to do with teachers getting students to take the tests seriously than any real improvement in student learning. Teachers are situated to reduce this variance by assessing children on many occasions and in different moods.

Dann assumes that teachers’ primary goal should be to foster students to become independent or “self-regulated” learners. Self-regulation involves a sense of self-efficacy, the motivation to improve, the metacognitive ability to examine self-performance, and meaningful feedback from teachers (p. 113). This goal requires teachers to spend individual time with students to encourage them toward their successes, ask questions that lead them toward greater examination of their own learning, and describe for them the academic areas where they should focus. In a sense, teachers strive for their students to become self-regulated, motivated learners as *meta-goals* in teaching. Moreover, if these *meta-goals* are important learning outcomes, teachers must evaluate students’ learning in these areas.

The title to the final chapter of her book summarizes her central thesis in three words: "Assessment as learning." For assessment to directly influence the educational process, it must not be considered an extraneous measure of outcomes, but a piece of the dialogue that occurs between students and

teachers. By moving assessment back into the educational process, teachers' roles as professionals are acknowledged. In the end, effective assessment does not alienate teachers and students, but brings them together as parties motivated for successful learning. Successful assessment requires students who want to improve and teachers who are professional participants. Without aligning assessment with motivation of classroom participants, large scale testing will merely document the increasing disenfranchisement of the students and teachers who are subject to the evaluative process.

Ruth Dann contributes a timely and persuasive argument for teachers in favor of utilizing assessment to foster learning in the classroom. She also frames the context for conducting research in classroom-based assessment that emphasizes the social milieu and self-regulatory aspects of learning. With so much interest in large-scale testing, researchers often ignore the student's role as an active participant in the assessment process.

As Dann states in the introduction, this book is not intended as a practical guide, but as a means of drawing attention toward using assessment to improve the learning process. I would like to see Dann expand upon *Promoting Assessment as Learning* to provide the practical guide that many seek. For assessment to effectively reflect a student's learning, teachers and researchers must consider the influence of motivation and other student characteristics on achievement. The book effectively provides a waypoint for this examination, but does not offer a guide.

Ruth Dann provides a valuable contribution to the dialogue on academic assessment. She introduces the idea that a child's educational history and the cultural influence of a society focused on numbers will add to the challenge of using assessment to help learning. She only briefly explores the increasing disparity between the teacher's professional role and the growing influence of single test scores. Teachers are in the situation of being the closest educational professional to the child, with opportunities to assess needs over an extended time and in many areas not within the narrow boundaries of standardized tests. Despite this, their voices are being disregarded in a culture focused on a prescribed and uniform set of standards. Dann takes a pragmatist's approach, facing the realities of a culture focused on assessment, identifying how teachers can improve their assessment practices, and pointing out the importance of what students bring to the assessment environment.

While the study presented in the book is small scale, it introduces the importance of learner characteristics (self-efficacy, motivation, metacognition and response to feedback) on successful assessment. In

addition, the study points to the obstacles faced by teachers in creating learner-centered assessment. Dann takes the metaphor of *assessment as yardstick* and reframes it into a metaphor that is more powerful: *assessment as lens*. Teachers who use assessment as a lens to focus their instruction take a significant step in developing learner-centered classrooms.

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