

Preface

Why This Book?

For almost 30 years, I have been working with teachers and administrators in schools and districts in the province of Ontario, Canada, as a colleague, researcher, and “critical friend.” My work has taken me into classrooms and staff rooms, marking sessions and student-led conferences, professional development sessions and teacher discussion groups.

From my unique vantage point of researcher, observer, and colleague in many classrooms, I was struck by the way assessment always came at the end, not only in the unit of work but also in teachers’ planning. And even in the planning, assessment received little attention. After columns of objectives and teaching strategies and resources in the planning grid, the assessment column would sit ominously stark, with cryptic entries such as “test” or “worksheet” or “project.” Assessment was almost an afterthought. At the same time, it often seemed as though too much time was being dedicated to testing that didn’t go anywhere.

I routinely heard that “assessment is the hardest part.” As a young researcher working in a school district, I was intrigued by the tensions and challenges that assessment created for teachers. I became a student of the ways and means of classroom assessment, sometimes informally, sometimes more formally. Although the recent preoccupation with assessment as a lever for educational reform has brought the discussion to the foreground, teachers have always expressed concern about their roles as assessors. In some recent research, middle years teachers told us that they are being caught between competing purposes of classroom assessment and are often confused and frustrated by the difficulties that they experience as they try to reconcile the demands (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2001).

Who Is This Book For?

I have written this book for those teachers and school leaders who are struggling with and trying to come to grips with the conflict that they

feel in relation to assessment. I hope that it will provide some alternate perspectives and beliefs about the role that assessment can play in the daily working of schools and classrooms, with real examples of how teachers are making assessment work to enhance student learning.

Teachers and school leaders can use this book as a focus for their discussions about what assessment means, especially as a part of learning and as a stimulus for deciding how they might change their practices. But changing practices will not be enough. An important element of these discussions and reflections should be the role of schooling and the role of educators in schools. Why? Because embedding some of the changes into routine practices without this discussion is unlikely to have much influence. Assessment as learning is premised on assumptions and beliefs that are simple in their articulation and very difficult in their application. Throughout the book, I have highlighted these assumptions by placing them in boxes. I invite you to consider your personal assumptions as you read mine and think about how your beliefs contribute to the way you engage in your work as a teacher.

I have also included examples from my own experience and the experience of colleagues, preservice candidates, and graduate students with whom I have worked throughout the book. These are all identified as “The Case of. . .” I find them all compelling and exciting images of the challenges and the possibilities that exist for making assessment work for students. I hope you do, too. Here is the first one.

“The Case of Understanding Mathematics Learning and Assessment”

I have had the pleasure, over several years, of working with a wonderful young secondary mathematics teacher who came to me because of an interest in learning more about assessment. During our association, she has given me insights into the difficulties associated with changing deeply held beliefs that are based on a lifetime of personal experience. At one point, she came to me with a new understanding on her part. “I know how to teach calculus,” she said. “I just don’t know what to do when they don’t get it.” After her own time in school, always successful and delighting in the intellectual challenge that mathematics provided, she had had a major epiphany. Her experience was not the same as the experience of her students, and she did not know what they were encountering when calculus was not “obvious” to them, as it was to her. Helping them learn meant finding out what concepts, misconceptions, skills, and relationships make up “getting calculus” so that she could help them unpack their own learning.

After being part of several graduate courses about classroom assessment and attending a range of workshops and conferences dedicated to the topic, this same teacher read the draft manuscript for this book. Another epiphany: “I’ve heard lots of people talk about ideas like connecting assessment to learning, giving feedback, encouraging students to talk about their thinking, but you know what? I didn’t get it. I kept saying to myself, ‘I do that.’ And I do, but not for the same reasons. At the end of the day, I still focused on what the information told me about how to give them a grade. Their learning was secondary.”

Taken together, these realizations on her part not only are dramatic shifts in her thinking that are resulting in some serious changes to her practice and even her knowledge about the underpinnings of her subject area, but they also demonstrate how subtle and challenging making these changes can be. It seems so easy, even commonplace, to change the language and not the concepts, to believe that the work is done, when it has barely started.

What Is This Book About?

This book is about classroom assessment—the kind of assessment that happens every day in classrooms everywhere. Certainly, there are other kinds of assessment in education, and much has and will be written about them, but not in this book. Instead, the focus is on what teachers and students do, what they *can* do, how they think, and how they might think about routine classroom assessment as an inextricable part of learning. The ideas in this book arise out of my musings, observations, and conversations with students and teachers; from hours of reading material; and from discussions with people around the world who are struggling with the same issues. Consequently, this book is premised on a number of beliefs and assumptions about the nature and purpose of schooling and the role of teaching and assessment in the learning process. The major and most dramatic assumption is that assessment can and should be much more than a check on learning that comes at the end. It is an integral part of the learning process that, all too often, has been ignored. Historically, educational assessment has largely been assessment *of* learning, designed to accredit or judge the work of students. Sometimes, it has been assessment *for* learning, with feedback loops to ensure that students are given cues to review their learning and move forward. Assessment *as* learning goes even deeper, however, and draws on the role of personal monitoring and challenging of ideas that are embedded in the learning process, and the role of both students and teachers in fostering this process. *Assessment As Learning* is not superficial tampering. It is a

fundamental shift in thinking about teaching and assessment, and about the relationship between them.

Throughout the book, my assumptions and perspectives will become clearer. When they do, I will attempt to provide a rationale and support for choosing this route as a compelling one for moving toward the kind of schooling that I believe will serve us all well. To that end, I have tried to shed some light on the assessment dilemmas that teachers feel, provide some insights into the complexity behind these tensions, and offer some suggestions for consideration in classrooms. I have not provided detailed directions for implementing classroom assessment strategies. Instead, I have tried to offer the following:

- An understanding of the reasons behind the confusion and discomfort that surround classroom assessment by detailing the way that the changing role of schooling and our increasing knowledge about the nature of learning have made classroom assessment much more complex
- Insight into the powerful influence that classroom assessment can have on students' learning
- Examples of mechanisms for effective use of assessment as learning in a variety of contexts, many of them drawn from actual examples provided by teachers whom I have come to know through my work

Organization of This Book

The book is organized into 11 chapters. Chapter 1 sets the stage for considering a new view of learning and assessment that argues for connecting them as part of the same process. Chapter 2 is a brief history of assessment, with attention to the influence of the current large-scale reform movement on classroom assessment. In Chapter 3, I make the case for considering assessment *of* learning, *for* learning, and *as* learning and make a concerted effort to rationalize shifting the existing balance among them in schools. Following the discussion of the purposes of assessment in relation to learning, Chapter 4 is about learning as the primary purpose for schools, and Chapter 5 details the links that exist between learning and assessment.

The next five chapters revisit what we know about learning and consider how assessment can contribute to deeper and better learning for students. Chapter 6 addresses diagnostic assessment—finding out what students believe to be true. The focus in Chapter 7 is motivation and the role that assessment can play in motivating students. In

Chapters 8 and 9, I get to the heart of the matter: How can assessment enhance and extend learning? Chapter 10 addresses the essential role of reflection and self-assessment in learning.

Finally, in Chapter 11, I have tried to identify some of the specific demands that looking at assessment as learning will make on teachers and to offer glimpses of what teachers should think about as they work to get to assessment that maximizes learning for all students.

At the end of each chapter, I have included some “Ideas for Follow-Up” that might be useful as groups of educators read and think about assessment as learning together. The questions are not comprehensive, but perhaps they can offer a starting point for conversation and sharing.

Writing this book has been a powerful learning experience for me. I have been forced to clarify my own thinking, challenge my assumptions, and put my ideas forward for constructive criticism from my colleagues and mentors, from my students and their students. I now find myself in the space between the production and the feedback. All comments are welcome. I hope this volume helps to stimulate conversation and challenge ideas—my own as well as others’.

Acknowledgments

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Many teachers have known, in their hearts, about the role that classroom assessment plays in learning. To all of the researchers who continue to examine and describe the power of classroom assessment, you have given them the evidence that they need to continue with the struggle to make learning the *raison d’être* of schools. From these teachers and the others who follow—thank you.

My own journey of awareness about the potential for classroom assessment as a vehicle for learning came from a lucky encounter (and subsequent long friendship) with Rick Stiggins, who had the courage to say, “I believe in teachers, I believe in classroom assessment, and I’ll stake my career on it.” We are all so grateful that he did and still does speak out with integrity, passion, and truth. Closer to home is my mentor and good friend, Bob Wilson, who pushes, cajoles, and never ceases to remind me that teachers are at the heart of learning in

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schools, and that they often do know best, even when they don't have the language to articulate their knowing. He inspires me to listen, and listen, and listen.

Once I was hooked on assessment, I have had the privilege to work with some wonderful and insightful colleagues and graduate students who constantly push me and teach me. To all of you in Scarborough, at OISE/UT, and around the world, thank you.

Finally, to family and friends who have listened to my ranting and watched me avoid writing in every possible way. You know what you have contributed—from a place at the table on Arran Lake to write, to answering midnight phone calls with a request for a virtual hug. I love you all.