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## CHAPTER 3

### Assessment *of* Learning, *for* Learning, and *as* Learning

In Chapter 1, I described a “preferred future” for assessment. My vision is one that makes assessment an integral part of learning—guiding the process and stimulating further learning. The word *assessment* is derived from the Latin *assidere*, meaning “to sit beside or with” (Wiggins 1993). Although this notion of a teacher sitting with her students to really understand what is happening as they pursue the challenges of learning is far removed from the role that assessment and evaluation have typically played in schools, many teachers have always done it. In this chapter, I look more closely at the various purposes for assessment that occurs routinely in classrooms. Classroom assessment is a complex undertaking that means something different to different audiences and in different situations. And so it should. Assessment has many purposes that sometimes support one another and sometimes compete or conflict with one another. As Wilson (1996) noted, teachers engage in a broad range of assessment roles, and keeping them straight is a challenging task (see Table 3.1).

Clearly, these roles overlap, and watching teachers try to manage the assessment activities and juggle them to satisfy the various goals shows how complex the process of classroom assessment really is. Also, tensions are embedded in these various roles and goals that cause concern for teachers. I hope that these tensions become more visible and understandable after I describe three different approaches to classroom assessment that have guided my thinking as I have contemplated the role of classroom assessment in my preferred future. The three approaches are *Assessment of Learning*, *Assessment for Learning* and *Assessment as Learning*. Although I intend to highlight the contribution of *Assessment for Learning* and *Assessment as Learning* as part of a preferred future, *Assessment of Learning* is also valuable and has its place. In my mind, it is important to understand them all, recognize the inevitable contradictions among them, know which one you are using and why, and use them all wisely and well.

**Table 3.1** Assessment Roles and Goals

| <i>Role</i>                 | <i>Goal</i>  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Teacher as mentor           | Provide feedback and support to each student.  |
| Teacher as guide            | Gather diagnostic information to lead the group through the work at hand.                          |
| Teacher the accountant      | Maintain records of students' progress and achievement.  |
| Teacher as reporter         | Report to parents, students, and the school administration about student progress and achievement. |
| Teacher as program director | Make adjustments and revisions to instructional practices.   |

SOURCE: Adapted from *Assessment Roles and Goals* (Wilson, 1996).

## Assessment *of* Learning

The predominant kind of assessment in schools is *Assessment of Learning*. Its purpose is summative, intended to certify learning and report to parents and students about students' progress in school, usually by signalling students' relative position compared to other students. *Assessment of Learning* in classrooms is typically done at the end of something (eg, a unit, course, a grade, a Key Stage, a program) and takes the form of tests or exams that include questions drawn from the material studied during that time. In *Assessment of Learning*, the results are expressed symbolically, generally as marks across several content areas to report to parents.

This is the kind of assessment that still dominates most classroom assessment activities, especially in secondary schools, with teachers firmly in charge of both creating and marking the test. Teachers use the tests to assess the quantity and accuracy of student work, and the bulk of teacher effort in assessment is taken up in marking and grading. A strong emphasis is placed on comparing students, and feedback to students comes in the form of marks or grades with little direction or advice for improvement. These kinds of testing events indicate which students are doing well and which ones are doing poorly. Typically, they don't give much indication of mastery of particular ideas or concepts because the test content is generally too limited and the scoring is too simplistic to represent the broad range of skills and knowledge that has been covered. But

this lack of specificity hasn't presented a problem because the teachers' perceived purpose of the assessment is to produce a rank order of the students and assign a symbol to designate the students' position within the group, whatever group it might be. Teachers maintain voluminous records of student achievement that are used only for justifying the grades that are assigned.

Although much of this book focuses on the next two approaches to assessment, there are and will always be milestones and junctures where "summative" assessment is called for and Assessment *of* Learning is essential. Doing it right is a challenge in itself.

Assessment *of* Learning and grading has a long history in education. They have been widely accepted by parents and the public. If they have served us so well, why would we worry about a process that works? Without moving too far away from my primary purpose, I'd like to highlight a few of the issues that are currently contentious about what we have always done. Although the public has been largely supportive of grading in schools, scepticism is increasing about its fairness and even its accuracy. Educational researchers and theorists have been critical of traditional grading practices for quite some time (Marzano, 2000). In terms of measurement theory, grades are highly suspect. Why? Because teachers consider many factors other than academic achievement when they assign grades; teachers weight assessments differently, and they misinterpret single scores on assessments to represent performances on a wide range of skills and abilities (Marzano, 2000). As education becomes an essential ingredient for a successful future, more attention will be paid to how grades are calculated and how well they actually reflect what they are taken to mean. The book is not yet closed on Assessment *of* Learning, and educators have a great deal to learn to ensure that it and the grades that result from it are defensible and worthwhile.

*To measure or to learn; that is the question.*

- Broadfoot (1996)

## Assessment *for* Learning

Assessment *for* Learning offers an alternative perspective to traditional assessment in schools. Simply put, Assessment *for* Learning shifts the emphasis from summative to formative assessment, from making judgments to creating descriptions that can be used in the service of the next stage of learning.

When they are doing Assessment *for* Learning, teachers collect a wide range of data so that they can modify the learning work for their students. They craft assessment tasks that open a window on what students know and can do already and use the insights that

Assumption: Classroom assessment can enhance learning

come from the process to design the next steps in observation, worksheets, questioning in class, student-teacher conferences or whatever mechanism is likely to give them information that will be useful for their planning and teaching. Marking is not designed to make comparative judgments among the students but to highlight each students' strengths and weaknesses and provide them with feedback that will further their learning.

When the cook tastes the soup, that's formative; when the guests taste the soup, the summative.

- Robert Stake

Clearly, teachers are the central characters in Assessment *for* Learning as well, but their role is quite different from that in the prior approach. In Assessment *for* Learning, they use their personal knowledge of

the students and their understanding of the context of the assessment and the curriculum targets to identify particular learning needs. Assessment *for* learning happens in the middle of learning, often more than once, rather than at the end. It is interactive, with teachers providing assistance as part of the assessment. It helps teachers provide the feedback to scaffold next steps. And it depends on teachers' diagnostic skills to make it work.

In reality, it is through classroom assessment that attitudes, skills, knowledge and thinking are fostered, nurtured and accelerated – or stifled.

-Hynes (1991)

Recordkeeping in this approach may include a grade book, but the records on which teachers rely are things like checklists of student's progress against expectations, artefacts, portfolios of students work over time, and worksheets to trace

the progression of students along the learning continuum.

## Assessment as Learning

Assessment *for* Learning can go a long way in enhancing student learning. By introducing the notion of Assessment *as* Learning, I intend to reinforce and extend the role of formative assessment for learning by emphasizing the role of the student, not only as a contributor to the assessment and learning process, but also as the critical connector between them. The student is the link. Students, as active, engaged, and critical assessors, can make sense of information, relate it to prior knowledge, and master the skills involved. This is the regulatory process in metacognition. It occurs when students personally monitor what they are learning and use the feedback from this monitoring to make adjustments, adaptations, and even major changes in what they understand. Assessment *as* Learning is the ultimate goal, where students are their own best assessors.

At some point, students will need to be self-motivating and able to bring their talents and knowledge to bear on the decisions and problems that make up their lives. They can't just wait for the teacher (or politicians, or salespeople, or religious leaders) to tell them whether or not the answer is "right." Effective assessment empowers students to ask reflective questions and consider a range of strategies for learning and acting. Over time, students move forward in their learning when they can use personal knowledge to construct meaning, have skills of self-monitoring to realize that they don't understand something, and have ways of deciding what to do next.

Assumption: Self-assessment is at the heart of the matter.

Recordkeeping in assessment *as* Learning is a personal affair. Students and teachers decide (often together) about the important evidence of learning and how it should be organized and kept. Students routinely reflect on their work and make judgements about how they can capitalise on what they have done already. Comparison with others is almost irrelevant. Instead, the critical reference points are the student's own prior work and the aspirations and targets for continued learning.

## Getting the Balance Right

These three approaches all contribute to student learning but in vastly different ways. Table 3.2 give a summary of the salient features of each approach.

As I mentioned earlier, all three assessment approaches have their place. The trick is to get the balance right. At the current juncture, almost all classroom assessment in a traditional environment is summative Assessment *of* Learning, focused on measuring learning after the fact and used for categorising students and reporting these judgements to others. A few teachers use Assessment *for* Learning by building in diagnostic processors – formative assessment and feedback at stages in the program – and giving students second chances to improve their marks (and, it is hoped, their learning). Systematic Assessment *as* Learning is almost nonexistent.

**Table 3.2** Features of Assessment *of, for, and as* Learning

| <i>Approach</i>                | <i>Purpose</i>  | <i>Reference Points</i>               | <i>Key Assessor</i> |
|--------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Assessment <i>of</i> Learning  | Judgments about placement, promotion, credentials, etc. | Other students                        | Teacher             |
| Assessment <i>for</i> Learning | Information for teachers' instructional decisions       | External standards or expectations    | Teacher             |
| Assessment <i>as</i> Learning  | Self-monitoring and self-correction or adjustment       | Personal goals and external standards | Student             |

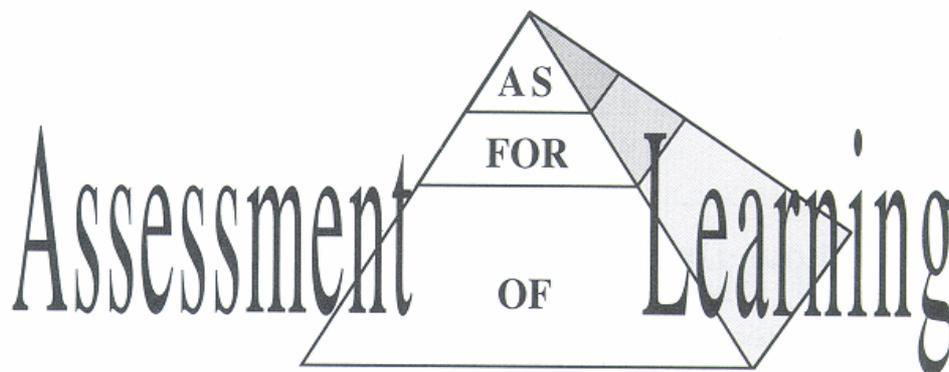
Obviously, there are times when information about students' achievements *of* key outcomes and the degree to which they compare with others is important and the approach should be assessment *of* Learning. The issue is whether schools should be utilising Assessment *of* Learning over and over again to such an extent that it leaves no place for other approaches to assessment. Figure 3.1 show this traditional relationship of the approaches to one another.

Figure 3.2 shows a reconfiguration of the pyramid to suggest a different kind of balance – one that emphasises increased attention to Assessment *for* and *as* Learning. In this scenario, Assessment *of* Learning has a role to play when decisions must be made that require summative judgments, or when teachers and students want to see the cumulative effect of their work, but this role is relatively small. The major focus is on classroom assessment that contributes to student learning, by the teacher (for learning) and by the student (as learning).

Given the history of schools as sorting institutions, the notion that assessment and learning are intimately and inextricably intertwined is revolutionary. On the surface of it, the ideas are appealing, but the fit with schools as we know them is uncomfortable and awkward. I suspect this is the dilemma that teachers have talked about when they say, “Assessment is the hardest part”. They have always been caught between monitoring learning and categorising students on the basis of their assessments, and teaching students, and they have struggled with these contradictory responsibilities. One teacher whom I interviewed recently expressed it this way:

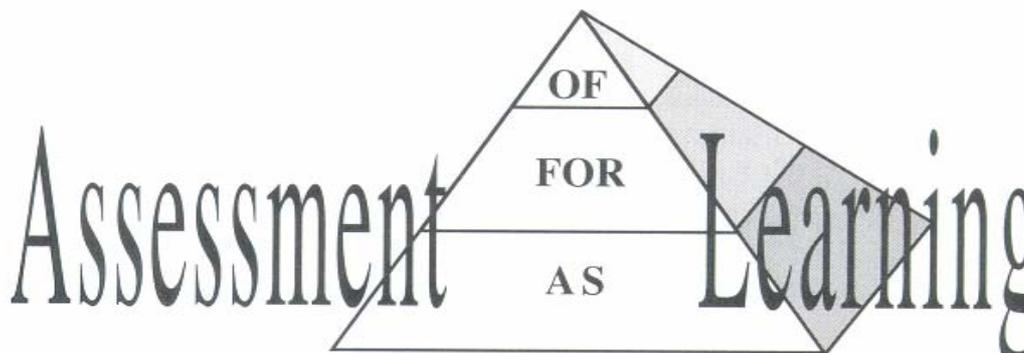
**Figure 3.1** Traditional Assessment Pyramid

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**Figure 3.2** Reconfigured assessment Pyramid

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I really struggle with assessment. I'm supposed to be teaching for mastery of learning skills. What does that have to do with common testing?

This tension, which has always existed, is exactly the reason for reconfiguring the balance. Teachers and administrators can implement this reconfiguration without creating a major upheaval in what the community, especially parents, expect of schools. Parents always have their own children's interests at heart. When they can see how assessment *for* and *as* Learning can contribute to enhanced learning and success for their child, it may draw them into the fray as willing allies in the focus on learning.

In this reconfigured assessment environment, assessment would make up a large part of the school day, not in the form of separate tests, but as a seamless part of the learning process. And there would be tests when the decisions to be made require identification of a few individuals or groups, or when a summative description is important for students and others as a milestone or rite of passage. In the real world, these incidents are far fewer than the experience of schools would lead us to believe.

### **Ideas for Follow-up**

1. Interview teachers in your school to identify the balance of purposes for assessment. What does the assessment pyramid look like?
2. Analyze samples of assessment tasks being used in your school. Are they designed to be assessment *of*, *for*, or *as* Learning?