Shift Happens: Using Assessment *as* Learning to Create Metacognitive Students

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Identifying the Issue: A Need for Assessment As Learning

Heidi Goodrich Andrade (2000) uses a compelling analogy in “Using Rubrics to Promote Thinking and Learning” to illuminate the need for increased assessment *as* learning in schools. Andrade presents a scenario where readers are informed that they are going to receive a performance review at work. She then asks the reader if they would prefer a letter grade from their boss or an informative rubric with feedback circled about their performance. In an authentic job situation, the likely response is that people would expect detailed feedback. Thus, if a teacher would expect this level of clarity from their supervisors, then the corollary is that teachers should provide clear expectations and clear suggestions to students so that they may prosper in their learning. Indeed, Andrade’s most concise summation is that “students learn from an instructional rubric in a way that they can’t learn from a letter grade” (Andrade 2000, P. 15). Indeed, letter grades seem increasingly unethical and counterproductive if the goal of education is to create curious, critical thinking, life-long learners who value education and seek to become metacognitive. Similarly, as Black (2004) states, “a numerical score or a grade does not tell students how to improve their work, so an opportunity to enhance their learning is lost.” (Black et al, 2004, P. 13) Indeed, from my own experience, students seem more interested in their letter grades than the feedback I’ve provided about their work, which is frustrating as a teacher who seeks to assist my students with insight into how to improve their skills and knowledge. Perhaps Stiggins (2002) articulates my emerging vision best when he suggests a radical paradigm shift away from the American model of constant testing. He ponders “how can we use assessment to help all our students *want* to learn? How can we help them feel *able* to learn.” (Stiggins 2002, P. 1). Ultimately, his suggestion is a radical departure from traditional assessment of learning; use assessments not as the final declaration of learning, but as a way to help students on the journey and continuum of their learning.

Poor grading practices are a major issue in education. Fortunately researchers such as Guskey, Andrade, Black, Stiggins, Hattie and Shepard participate in the dialogue surrounding sound grading practices. While many teachers are familiar with traditional assessment *of* learning, and there is growing dialogue and professional development around assessment *for* learning, a strong pedagogical and ethical case suggests teachers should inculcate their classes with more assessment *as* learning. As Shepard (2000) explains “assessment and instruction are often conceived as curiously separate in both time and purpose.” (Shepard 1993, P. 4) Ultimately, assessment as learning can be a powerful tool used to create metacognitive students who can anticipate and build their own grades based on criteria and rubrics. As a result of empowering students through lessons in how teachers grade, teachers can diminish the mystique encircling marking and assist students in becoming self-reflexive and able to strive towards achieving target criteria. Indeed, Heidi Andrade (2000) would concur with Shepard in that she describes how “traditionally […] educators have kept [their] criteria and standards to [themselves]. The answers to the test were secret and teachers tended not to articulate what counted when they gave grades” (Andrade 2000, P. 14). Unequivocally, past practices were not conducive to awakening a consciousness among students about the process of assessment. At it’s worst, poor assessment practices were not simply benign, but detrimental. Assessment of learning taken to the extreme leaves no room for a student to question the validity of a grade and it shelters the teacher in an esoteric cloak where they cannot be challenged by students; thus, students simply accept the status quo of an unfair system and exhibit blind faith in the teacher’s grading practices. Similarly, Guskey (2003)explains how

“some students have prepared for major assessments and done poorly, which teaches them that hard work and effort don’t pay off in school because the time and effort that they spent on studying had little influence on results. And second, they learn that they cannot trust their teachers.” (Guskey 8)

Essentially, Guskey points out that some students become discouraged and view assessment as an unfair game lacking a clearly outlined rule-book.

Lorrie Shepard provides a comprehensive examination of assessment as learning in “The Role of Assessment in a Learning Culture.” She raises several concerns about the disconnect between assessment and teaching. She argues that the two are complimentary and should be intertwined and serve each other. The current disconnect results from the fact that “instruction […] is drawn from an emergent paradigm, while testing is held over from the past” (Shepard 1993, P. 4). Thus, education as a system needs to “change the form and purpose of classroom assessment to make it more fundamentally a part of the learning process” (P.4). Accordingly, she would support researchers like Andrade who provide solutions to outmoded testing paradigms.

Solutions: What Does Assessment As Learning Look Like?

Traditionally, assessment has been considered as an end point in learning. However, a superior education system should reframe the assessment paradigm to act as an integral part of the learning and instruction process. If students are able to demystify assessment practices and clearly visualize their goals and become metacognitive, then they could self-evaluate and work towards proactive self-improvement. Indeed, Shepard (2000) believes that “in order for assessment to play a more useful role in helping students learn it should be moved into the middle of the process instead of being postponed as only the end-point of instruction” (Shepard 2000, P. 10). End-point examinations lack the authenticity that students will find in the world. Seldom will adults experience a dramatic end to learning and a shift to a completely new skill taught and examined in isolation. Moreover, usually at a job, there are clear criteria set out for a job and a worker knows when they have to do to complete the criteria.

However, at times teachers do not provide the clarity necessary for student success. Indeed,

“Frederiksen and Collins (1989) used the term transparency to express the idea that students must have a clear understanding of the criteria by which their work will be assessed. In fact, the features of excellent performance should be so transparent that students can learn to evaluated their own work in the same way that their teachers would.” (Shepard 2000, P. 11)

Indeed, my utopian ideal of assessment in my class is where students can take my clearly laid out rubric, complete an assignment and grade themselves. This would reveal that students had achieved a self-actualized level of metacognitive ability and subsequently, would result in less grading for me. In this utopia, as Shepard points out, “student self assessment serves cognitive purposes, […] but it also promises to increate students’ responsibility for their own learning and to make the relationship between teachers and students more collaborative.” (Shepard P. 12).

Feedback: How Assessment as Learning Lowers Recycling Costs.

Many teachers have experienced the crushing blow of staying up late, sacrificing time with loved ones or delaying leisure activities in order to grade student work. Frustratingly, after hours of careful feedback, students look to the letter grade, ignore the feedback and jettison the work in the recycle bin as they exit the classroom. Indeed, as Black’s (2004) research determined, “the giving of numerical scores or grades has a negative effect, in that students ignore comments when marks are also given.” (Black et al, 2004, P. 13) Assessment as learning saves the environment, in that it encourages students not to throw out my English and History assignments; students know they may redo any assignment. Accordingly, they keep assignments to learn from them prior to completing the next similar assignment. Because I have begun to use rubrics and to teach students about the grading process, I have found through conversations with my class that there is “less distrust and more appreciation that standards are not capricious or arbitrary” (Shepard 2000, P. 12). Indeed, many of my students expressed distress in a classroom discussion about how some teachers grade; some student have no idea how their grade was determined. Ultimately, through inviting students to become assessors themselves, researchers like

“Klenowski (1995) found that students participating in self-evaluation became more interested in the criteria and substantive feedback than in their grade per se. Students also reported that they had to be more honest about their own work as well as being fair with other students, and they had to be prepared to defend their opinions in terms of the evidence.” (Shepard 12)

In English 9, I have developed two-sided rubrics for the writing process. On one side is a student assessment and on the other side is the exact same rubric for teacher assessment. Andrade would be proud since she espouses that “instructional rubrics provide students with more informative feedback about their strengths and areas in need of improvement than traditional forms of assessment do.” (Andrade 2000, P 15) Indeed, very interestingly, of 60 students, only four students displayed a substantial disparity in their self-assessment when compared with the teacher assessment. Andrade drew similar conclusions in her study of seventh grade students. She concluded that students began to “internalize the criteria contained in the rubrics and thereby [developed] an understanding of good writing.” In this case, the assessment and evaluation methods became tools of instruction with a long-lasting positive educational impact; students had both met the learning outcomes and developed the skill of self-assessment. The process also thereby demystified grading and students became more attuned to the concept of evaluation. In essence, students had developed into empowered learners.

Ultimately, teachers need to change the predominant “assessment of learning” culture because some “children and adolescents are ‘imprisoned in the identity of bad pupil and opponent [of education]”( Shepard P. 10) as a result of a system that serves only students who fit the traditional academic mould. Assessment as learning is a tool that when provided to students, can help liberate them from an oppressed role by equipping them with a skill that clarifies and illuminates teacher grading. Once conscious of the process of marking, students can strive to meet criteria, co-design evaluation rubrics and improve their grades. Indeed, Guskey (2003) explains that “successful students typically know how to take corrective action on their own. They save their assessments and review the items or criteria they missed.” (Guskey 2003, P11) Thus, Guskey (2003) explains that “Teachers who use classroom assessments as part of the instructional process help all of their students do what the most successful students have learned to do for themselves.” (Guskey 2003, P11) Ultimately, Andrade would agree with Guskey and exhort teachers to create rubrics in their classes so that students could use them to transform into Guskey’s “successful students.”

Conclusions:

Guskey, Stiggins, Andrade, Black et al, and Shepard all participate in the dialogue surrounding an emergent and exciting conceptualization of assessment. Their tacit and overt discussions of assessment *as* learning reveal that a paradigm shift towards using assessments as a teaching tool holds exciting possibilities for all students. Through clear rubrics and expectations coupled with directly teaching pupils how teachers assess, all students have access to the previously esoteric realm of teacher evaluation techniques. Once empowered by teachers through learning about assessment, students become more metacognitive and according to Stiggins (2002), they ”come to understand what it means to be in charge of their own learning – to monitor their own success and make decisions that bring greater success.” (Stiggins 9). Thus, teachers should be encouraged to provide opportunities for students to self and peer assess to help them develop the capacity to grade themselves with such accuracy that they will be able to anticipate teacher grades and thereby fix errors prior to submitting work. This skill will hopefully translate past their schooling experience and result in Maslow’s ideal of a self-actualized student. Indeed, assessment as learning holds endless possibilities for student success and is another crucial tool in a teacher’s arsenal towards creating inspired, thoughtful, curious and successful students.

Works Cited:

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