



# Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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*Just for the ASKing!* is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that help administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. This month's issue focuses on the need to radically change our assessment practices.

## Moving Out of the Assessment Dark Ages



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

While much is being written about assessment, this important topic has not been properly or adequately addressed by teachers and administrators. As practitioners, we have been on cruise control; it has been business as usual. We have used assessment practices to which we have become accustomed with little conversation about whether or not they are appropriate or effective. In our schools, some students have successfully survived our assessment instruments while others have struggled or fallen by the wayside.

The time has come for us to carefully and methodically analyze our assessment practices. Only through thoughtful dialogue and an honest, realistic examination of how we determine when and how well students are learning will we be able to move out of the assessment dark ages.

There are a number of issues and challenges which seem to get in our way. Reaction to new ideas spans the spectrum from “That’s a great idea and I will try it,” to “I don’t see any reason to change how I assess my students.” We cannot continue to follow the same practices we have always used unless they are in the best interest of student learning. For some people, asking them to rethink their assessment practices constitutes an infringement on their professional judgment. While others are open-minded, inquisitive, and willing to try new approaches, the bottom line is that there are a number of issues that are holding some of us back with regard to assessment. Below are issues that teachers and administrators have brought to my attention along with some personal thoughts and reactions.

### **Archaic Practices**

Some writers on assessment put forth the belief that we are using the same assessment practices that have been in use for the past hundred years. There was a time in our past when rapping a student on the knuckles with a ruler for misbehavior or requiring a student to stand in the corner wearing a dunce cap were teacher responses to classroom issues. We are appalled at the thought of such teacher behavior today. When we limit our assessment to fact-based questions (fill-in-the-blank, multiple choice, etc.) which require student memorization, aren’t we applying practices that need to be re-examined in light of what we know about student learning? How students demonstrate their learning has many avenues; we need to expand the way we let students show us what they know.

## **Time Management**

Many teachers seem willing to allow children multiple opportunities on assessments, or to allow students a second chance to show what they learned after re-teaching. The outcry I frequently hear is: “I don’t have the time for second chances or re-teaching!” Although I hear this response from some teachers, I also hear from other educators that they are learning new approaches which are not time consuming and which are having a positive impact on student learning. Teachers have also concluded that it does no good to move on if students have not mastered content; they understand that they must keep an open mind, explore different options, and add new practices to their assessment repertoires. The key to adding fresh thinking to one’s practice is collaborative conversations with other practitioners. I hear continually of exciting new ideas that have resulted from these high-powered conversations. It is worth a try.

## **District Requirements**

Again and again, I encounter individuals who are willing to rethink their assessment ideas. Their frustrations arise, however, when they talk about district standards that require them to have a set number of grades per week or quarter. Additionally, many districts have put in place pacing guides which teachers are required to follow with little or no flexibility. A third issue that elicits frustration among teachers is the requirement to administer periodic assessments developed at the central office level with no opportunity to use the assessment results to give feedback to students. Some teachers are very willing to try new ideas but they feel that they are hampered by decisions outside their local schools. If we truly expect teachers to think differently about assessment, decision makers must likewise rethink the requirements they expect schools to follow.

## **Obsessive Grading**

Some teachers overburden themselves because they choose to grade each and every piece of work a student completes. The practice is time consuming and often does not afford an opportunity for the teacher to provide important feedback to students so that they can improve future performances. “Gradeaholics” mean well, but grading everything a student does can result in excessive anxiety on the part of students, eat up precious instructional time, and minimize the amount of important feedback the teacher could be providing to students.

## **Human Factor**

Some educators get so caught up in their curriculum that they forget the human factor that has a huge impact on student learning. The old adage rings true: Students don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. Teachers often regale me with success stories about turning students around, and at the heart of every story is the personal interest the adult showed in the student. The importance of knowing students well, treating them with dignity and respect, understanding how they learn, and giving them the opportunity to show what they can do in a variety of ways can have a huge impact on student achievement.

## **Diminished Authority**

I have heard the argument that by giving students multiple opportunities or second chances on assessments will cause the teacher to be seen as a “pushover” by the students resulting in a loss of respect and authority for the teacher. In fact, by setting students up for success, by ensuring that students know that their teacher will not give up on them, and by requiring students to master content, the exact opposite response is likely to occur in the minds of students. They will see the teachers as someone who is genuinely willing to compromise and who is sincerely interested in student learning.

## **Rigid Thinking**

Teachers often begin the school year by distributing to students a syllabus for their course along with their grading policy. Included in the handout are the teacher’s requirements regarding make-up work, late or

incomplete work, or missed assignments. All too often, a teacher's attitude about these issues is rarely examined in light of whether they are the best approaches to follow. Some teachers assert that it is important to have high standards for student work in order to teach the student responsibility, and they rigidly apply their rules without thinking about the impact on students. Whereas the teacher might feel that having high standards will motivate students to do better, it often has the exact opposite effect. Students who do not consistently follow a teacher's requirements often find themselves falling behind and they give up trying. They must believe that "they're still in the game." Flexibility instead of rigidity may result in greater student buy-in, participation, and overall work completion.

### **Student Failure**

An important issue related to assessment is the attitude among some educators that students have the right to fail. The counter argument is that they are very young and that their immaturity, faulty judgment or youthful attitude often gets in the way of their achievement. A number of school districts across the country have readjusted their thinking and put in place roadblocks that keep students from failing. These obstacles to student failure include required remediation sessions, intensive one-on-one tutoring, multiple opportunities to improve performance on assessments, and smaller classes for skill building. The results of implementing these practices have been a decrease in student failures, an increase in student motivation, and an overall school-wide improvement in standardized test scores.

### **Homework Emphasis**

One issue that causes a significant emotional reaction from teachers is the topic of homework. Some educators feel strongly that homework is an important component of student learning and that a student's failure to complete homework assignments should reduce a student's overall grade. An examination of student achievement data at several locations reveals that the primary reason for student failure was the student's delinquency in completing homework. In a number of instances, the students passed their standardized test but failed their course. It is also important to remember that some studies have concluded that homework completion has no direct impact or minimal impact on overall student achievement. Homework should be viewed as a support for the learning process during the formative stages of the learning process and not a reason to label a student a failure.

### **Ineffective Feedback**

The data is clear: Dylan William reports that 4,000 research studies over 40 years have shown that when they are implemented properly, formative assessments can double the rate of student learning. Additional research findings have overwhelmingly concluded that frequent, short assessments with teacher feedback, and allowing students to make instructional adjustments have resulted in significant gains in student learning. All serious-minded educators must examine how they utilize formative assessments to provide feedback to students if they want students to truly learn.

The time has come for all educators to take a deep and intensive look at how they are assessing student learning, how they are using assessment data to make instructional decisions, and if their existing assessment beliefs are impeding true student growth. The students who are in our classes only have one opportunity with each teacher. Should we not do whatever it takes to motivate, stimulate and celebrate student achievement because we have adopted the best practices to follow? The only thing holding us back is our willingness to open our minds to new possibilities.

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