

Assessment, Teaching, and Learning

The Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education

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Assessment, Teaching, and Learning: A New Vision of Pedagogy

The Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education offers a vision of pedagogy — the central mechanism operative in education — that is interactively and transformatively inclusive of assessment, teaching, and learning. Our decision to make concern for teaching and learning conjoint with the traditional concerns of assessment rests on a vision of teaching and learning as human processes, which are directed at the enablement and achievement of high levels of intellectual competence in all learners. That is, the effective interconnectedness of assessment, teaching, and learning affords all learners pathways toward the best attachment of information and the most effective ways to use it relative to their context(s). In this vision “to teach” are goals to enliven, enable, and empower learners through deliberately orchestrated learning experiences, guided exploration, didactic instruction, and modeled explication. In contrast to earlier notions of teaching involving the transfer of knowledge, skills, and values, this view makes the teaching person a guide, a coach, a model, an orchestrator, a stimulator, and a resource person. This reference to teaching and learning is bi-focal and bi-directional and references the assimilation and accommodation of that which is old, as well as the active construction and integration of that which is new. While not rejecting the traditional emphasis on associative memory and endogenous retrieval processes, the new vision of assessment, teaching, and learning privileges constructive and trans-active social processes — which are endogenous, exogenous, and situative while being transformative of the participants who are simultaneously teaching as well as learning persons.

The products of these assessment, teaching, and learning endeavors are reflected in the achievement of intellectual competence, which references the developed abilities and dispositions to understand as well as to know, to perceive critically, to explore widely, to bring rational order to chaos, to bring knowledge and technique to bear on the solution of problems, to test ideas against explicit and considered moral values — as well as against empirical evidence — and at the same time to recognize and create material

and abstract relationships between real and imaginary phenomena. These achievements are less focused on what we want learners to know and do, and are more sharply focused on what it is that we want learners to become, to be disposed toward, and to be (i.e., thinking and compassionate human beings).

Teaching, learning, and assessment are increasingly viewed as functioning in symbiotic relationships one to the other. Although each has an independent history and a separate traditional constituency, they are, perhaps, best viewed as **parts of a whole cloth**, where parts are differentially emphasized at various times and for different purposes.

In our vision of assessment, teaching, and learning, achievement standards are central, but the explication of what we want learners to know about specific disciplines and to be able to do in meeting these standards must be considered as instrumental to what we want learners to be and become. The old “scholastic aptitudes” may not have been so far from the mark in the effort to achieve some distance from the specific content covered in the diverse curricula of the nation. Those “scholastic aptitudes” can be thought of as generalized developed abilities that not only reflect the capacity to handle academic work, but, more importantly, reflect abilities that result from education of high quality. Instead of scholastic aptitudes, it may be more appropriate to think of developed intellectual abilities

or competencies. These developed abilities are not so much reflected in the specific discipline-based knowledge a student may have acquired, but in the ability and disposition to use the meta-products of having learned to engage and solve quotidian, as well as novel, problems adaptively.

Teaching, learning, and assessment are dialectical and trans-active components of the pedagogical process, and increasingly these components are viewed as functioning in symbiotic relationships. Although each of these components has an independent history and a separate traditional constituency, they are, perhaps, best viewed as parts of a whole cloth, which parts are differentially emphasized at various times and for different purposes.

In some situations, it can be productive to use assessment data to diagnose and prescribe. In other situations, the purpose may be to hold someone accountable. Members of the Gordon Commission are increasingly persuaded that the primary purpose of assessment in education should be to inform, as well as improve teaching and learning processes and outcomes. We concur with the position advanced by the National Research Council (Knowing What Students Know) that it can be dysfunctional to try to have the same assessment instruments and procedures serve multiple purposes. Economical as such practices may appear, assessment procedures used for multiple purposes can be disturbing and destructive to the ends intended to be served. This is especially likely to be the case when high stakes are attached to the use of data from assessments used for multiple purposes.

Appropriate articulation between assessment, teaching, and learning processes requires that the development of instruments and procedures for assessment be informed by an intimate understanding of the processes of teaching and learning. Many recent advances in psychometric technology reflect subtle aspects of instruction and special features of the psychology of subject-matter learning. Modern conceptions of teaching, learning, and assessment as components of pedagogy are changing, and in each of these components we see aspects of the other components embedded: teaching is moving toward guided exploration and inquiry; learning is depending more on experience, construction, explication, and reflection; and assessment has begun to incorporate tasks involving problem solving, application, and comparative interpretation. Some of the most effective teaching that I have seen recently has been embedded in assessment

probes and assessment situations, while some of the most productive assessments that I have observed have been embedded in curriculum materials and teaching/learning transactions.

Increasingly, concern for excellence, equity, and fairness in assessment requires that responsible approaches to educational assessment include attention to the quality of teaching and learning transactions and the sufficiency of learner access to appropriate opportunities to learn. Given the changes in the demographics in the U.S. systems of assessment, teaching and learning that are incapable of addressing the issues of diversity, equity, and academic excellence will simply become marginalized in the 21st century. Assessment, teaching, and learning will — out of necessity — have to be appropriate to the diversity in the population that must be served and informative of the teaching and learning processes in which they will be embedded.

Summary

- The teaching person is a guide, a coach, a model, an orchestrator, a stimulator, and a resource person.
- Intellectual competence is less focused on what we want learners to know and do, and is more sharply focused on what it is that we want learners to become.
- Achievement standards are central, but what we want learners to know about specific disciplines and to be able to do in meeting these standards must be considered as instrumental to the achievement of intellectual competence.
- Assessment in education should inform and improve teaching and learning processes and outcomes.
- Assessment, teaching, and learning will — out of necessity — have to be appropriate to the diversity in the population that must be served and informative of the teaching and learning processes in which they will be embedded.

Chairman Gordon's Biases

In the interest of full disclosure, I bring to your attention the fact that I have some biases that influence my conceptual leadership of the Gordon Commission. Though comfortable with these biases, I welcome and appreciate any critique. I am not entrenched in a way that prohibits continued thinking that can contribute to the fuller dialogue and framing of the effective interrelationships of assessment, teaching, and learning. I am resolved, however, that the ideas below provide a starting point in a new discussion of important components of intellectual competence and its assessment.

- I believe that traditional approaches to testing give too much emphasis to a limited view of the status of a narrow range of cognitive functions, as well as to the neglect of the affective and situative domains of human performance and the processes by which these functions and domains are engaged.
- Intellectual competence is much richer than is captured by the traditional indicators of intelligence that are privileged in much of our educational assessment practices.
- Our assessment instruments and procedures tend to neglect the diverse contexts and perspectives born of different cultural experiences and cultural identities and the influence of these contexts, perspectives, and identities on human performance. However, the most important features of intellectual competence may require that the expression of competence be demonstrated independent of such contexts, perspectives, and identities. Yet, is it possible that the essential features of intellectual competence can be demonstrated using other than hegemonic indicators of developed ability?
- Traditionally, testing has privileged — in its purposes — accountability, prediction, and selection to the neglect of diagnosis, prescription, and the informing and improving of teaching and learning processes and outcomes. I believe that the most important functions and purposes of measurement in education concern informing, as well as improving, teaching and learning processes and outcomes.

- Traditional approaches to assessment have emphasized relative position and competition to the neglect of criterion-based judgments of competence. The meritocratic ideology that dominates in testing may be dysfunctional to developmental democratization, particularly when developmental opportunities are distributed on the basis of prior developmental achievements and when level of prior development may be, in part, a function of the maldistribution of the opportunity to develop, learn, or excel.

Assessment, Teaching, and Learning (ATL) is a bi-monthly bulletin that is the primary instrument of communication from the Chairman of the Gordon Commission to a broad audience of readers who are concerned with the relationships between psychometrics and education. The intent is to use this bulletin to stimulate conversation and debate concerning the multiple purposes of assessment in education; the possibilities for the improvement of teaching and learning processes and outcomes through the more creative use of measurement in education; visions of future change in the nature and practice of education; and the need for change in the capacity of the educational measurement enterprise necessary to the needs implicit in those visions. *ATL* is available, without cost to the reader, electronically and in print.

- Traditional approaches to assessment privilege knowing, knowing how to, and mastery of veridical knowledge, while intellectual competence, emerging epistemologies, and the cohabitation of populations with diverse cultural forms may — increasingly — require multiple ways of knowing, understanding as well as knowing, and the ability to adjudicate competing relationships in our knowledge and in the production of knowledge.

- I still struggle with a debate that I had with the late Bob Glaser. Bob knew and I know that the resolution lies somewhere between — and in the interaction between — knowledge mastery and mental processing, but I cannot move far away from the idea that the pursuit of content mastery should be in the service of the development of mental processes. Michael Martinez's notions in his book, *Education as the Cultivation of Intelligence*, resonate with me. Michael's mentor, the late Dick Snow, left an incomplete idea in which he was developing the argument for the study of content (subject matter) as instrumental to the development of intellect. If we are correct, does that position suggest that we de-emphasize content mastery as the primary purpose of teaching and learning and as our prime indicator of intellectual competence in our tests? I am attracted to the notion of the study of any content as a means of nurturing intellect, as well as for the purposes of knowing.
- Please note that I use the term "intellectual competence," which for me connotes the effective orchestration of affective, cognitive, and situative processes in the interest of intentional human agency. I place affective first for reasons other than respect for alphabetical order. Human activity appears to begin with affect, and

I have come to believe that while cognition ultimately informs affect, it is affect that gives rise to cognitive functions. The primacy of one or the other is not the current issue. I have the bias that traditional approaches to educational testing have given insufficient attention to the influence of affect on human performance, and we have done so to the disadvantage of the psychometric enterprise. I fully understand that affective and situative processes are unstable and messy, but attribution, disposition, intentionality, and motivation are too important as influences on human performance. We cannot continue to leave them out of the calculus of assessment in education. How to include them is the problem, not whether they should be included.



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Chairman Gordon also is the John M. Musser Professor of Psychology—Emeritus, Yale University, and the Richard March Hoe Professor of Psychology and Education—Emeritus, Teachers College, Columbia University.

In line with Chairman Gordon's thinking, *ATL* is committed to pushing forward innovative and practical considerations from scholars that take seriously the advancement of human capital through the development of strong minds. Perspectives will be anchored in the desire and need to do better in the utilization of assessment, and will be supplemented in future issues with readings, resources, and lists that help to frame the future of assessment in a way that is responsive to 21st-century learners. We look forward to public discourse and trust our readers also will make their perspectives known through contacting us.

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The Gordon Commission was established by ETS to investigate and advise on
the nature and use of educational testing in the 21st century. 18885