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Implementing Alternative Assessment: Opportunities and Obstacles

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Abstract

The theoretical framework for using alternative assessment in the classroom includes considering learners as constructors of knowledge; finding authenticity in materials and activities; employing dynamic, ongoing evaluation tools; and empowering students. By putting these ideas into practice, individual attributes of initiative, choice, vision, self-discipline, compassion, trust, and spontaneity can be promoted in students. The opportunities and obstacles associated with implementing alternative assessment in the classroom, as seen through the eyes of a group of graduate students, are presented here.

The “freedom factor” as defined by Graves (2002, 4) is an amalgam of a number of components: initiative, choice, vision, self-discipline, compassion, trust, and spontaneity. As part of quality education for students in a democratic society, these would seem to be desirable traits to promote in individuals in our classrooms. However, as noted by Graves (2002), these may not be traits that can be effectively promoted in a climate of high-stakes testing.

High-stakes testing is widely believed to be the force behind educational reform and, presumably, resulting quality education. Though policy makers and the public judge the impact of educational reform efforts by comparing changes in test scores over time, testing experts question the use of high-stakes testing as the public benchmark of educational quality (Linn 2000). Moreover, the consequences of testing and testing outcomes for many students—particularly students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds—are onerous. Labeling students and the gate-keeping effect of testing programs most seriously impact this population of students (Bauer 1999; Au 2000; Garcia and Pearson 1994; Kohn 2000). According to Kohn (2000), testing is particularly

harmful to low-income and minority students. In fact, socioeconomic status accounts for most of the variance in test scores from one student to the next.

Hoffman, Assaf, and Paris (2001, 482) stated that reform resulting from testing is “an illusion that masks an intrusion of testing into good teaching” and, by the authors’ extension, diminishes the use of alternative assessment. Alternative assessment—which also is referred to as classroom-based, qualitative, informal, or performance assessment—is a way to gauge student learning other than formal testing. Alternative assessment exhibits several distinguishing characteristics:

- Alternative assessment is situated in the classroom with teachers making choices in the measures used.
- Alternative assessment is based on a constructivist view of learning whereby the student, the text, and the context impact learning outcomes.
- Alternative assessment is predicated on the view that learning processes are equal to, if not greater than, the resulting products.

Classroom-based assessment has the distinction of immediately informing teachers and students, as well as parents, of student performance on an ongoing basis. Unlike test scores with delayed reporting and derived scores whose interpretation is often complex and represents a one-time snapshot of performance, alternative assessment is more directly useful to all stakeholders. Alternative literacy assessment methods include such practices as teacher anecdotal/observation records, teacher and student reflective journals, student reading logs, tape recordings of student oral reading, teacher-student-parent conferences, and portfolios (Garcia and Pearson 1991; Graves and Sunstein 1992; Rhodes and Shanklin 1993; Tierney and Clark 1998; Valencia 1998; Serafini 2001; Flippo 2003). Other measures of inquiry into student performance beyond cognitive information include those means by which affective information, such as interests and attitudes, is obtained (Flippo 2003).

The close alignment of instruction and assessment within an authentic context or a situated context is effective in determining what children know and can do. For example, through the processes associated with portfolio assessment—student selection of the best evidence of their learning, reflection on why a piece is best evidence, and a statement of future learning goals—teachers are informed about student learning and can make choices about subsequent instruction that will benefit the student. Or, when children write in journals about their reading books of choice, teachers can take this information, observe associated behaviors, and make a diagnosis about student instructional needs.

Promoting Alternative Assessment

In teaching graduate courses in literacy assessment, the authors assiduously promote the use of alternative assessment or classroom-based assessment. Their students learn the theory that underlies the use of alternative assessment, explore the differences between testing and alternative assessment, understand the learner-centered nature of alternative assessment, and see how these measures can be implemented in the classroom. Because these students have varying levels of knowledge and experience with testing and classroom-based assessment, they are encouraged to weigh testing against alternative measures given their own instructional context and within their own frame of reference.

The goal of the courses is to help participants develop a knowledge base that will lead to improved professional classroom decision making about children and their learning needs. Pearson (2003, 15) stated that professional knowledge needs to be broad and deep. Teachers need to use their knowledge to “create just the right curricular mix for each and all . . . and alter those approaches when the evidence that passes before their eyes says they are not working.”

A Tall Order

Hoffman et al. (2001) surveyed teachers to determine how testing affects teachers, students, the curriculum, and instructional practices. The results showed that excellence in teaching may be threatened or compromised by high-stakes testing, and that alternative assessment and classroom-situated measures of student achievement offer viable means of improving teaching and learning. Therefore, helping university students in teacher preparation programs, as well as in-service teachers, to understand alternative classroom-based measures and be aware of the procedures and underlying policies of standardized testing is essential. The authors stress, however, that educators must be mindful of classroom and school realities regarding the measurement of student achievement. School and district mandates must be considered, as well as the preconceived opinions teachers may have of alternative assessment and its implementation.

Theoretical Framework

Learners as constructors of knowledge. Alternative assessment is compatible with the constructivist theory, which views learners as active constructors of knowledge (Estrin 1993; Shepard 2000). Meaning cannot be imparted from teacher to student; rather meaning is made, not given (Eisner 1999). The sociocultural view of learning suggests that individuals become proficient in learning by engaging in social interactions (Vygotsky 1978; Moll 1990; Shepard 2000). Alternative assessment has the potential to reverse the traditional paradigm of student passivity and replace it with student initiative, self-discipline, and choice. For example, during portfolio development, students collect their own work, select the pieces that are best evidence of their achievement and, finally, reflect on why they chose certain pieces over others (Hansen 1998; Valencia 1998). Through this process, students engage in self-evaluation and set goals for their learning. They are no longer “defenseless vessels waiting to be filled with facts” (Wasserstein 1994, 14). Instead, they are masters of their own learning and sense making (Graves 2002).

Authentic and situated in the classroom. Alternative assessment takes into account the classroom context and individual students’ progress. Assessment activities are part of the classroom environment and ongoing classroom practices, and provide specific feedback to teachers so that they can adjust their teaching and affect student learning immediately (Rhodes and Shanklin 1993; Roller 1996; Valencia 1998; Shepard 2000). Teachers do not have to set aside time for testing, because assessment is integrated with instruction.

Dynamic ongoing assessment. Because the student’s entire learning process is recorded, the teacher has an ongoing view of how students approach, monitor, and process reading and writing. Similarly, students engage in self-evaluation and self-reflection through the use of projects such as portfolios and reading logs, which enable them to keep

track of their own learning. Hansen (1998) noted the distinction between accountability and responsibility. Accountability connotes a specific ending point, while responsibility suggests continuous student reckoning. Self-discipline, self-initiative, and trust are seeded when students have responsibility.

Empowerment of students. Student ownership for learning, the value of setting appropriate personal goals, and evaluation of one's own progress toward these goals are hallmarks of alternative assessment (Hansen 1998; Valencia 1998). Self-reflection and assessment by students make them more active in and responsible for their learning and make the relationship between teachers and students more collaborative (Wasserstein 1994; Shepard 2000).

This theoretical framework serves as the foundation for the assessment courses offered to graduate students in the authors' language literacy program and becomes the springboard for conversations on alternative assessment's viability in classrooms given the reality of high-stakes testing. Graduate students discussed their stance from the perspective of personal classroom experiences. Their course writing, including journals and reflection papers, provided a heightened awareness of the opportunities and obstacles related to implementing alternative literacy assessment.

Opportunities

The opportunity to provide positive experiences for students and the ability to offer responsive instruction to students' needs were identified by course participants as the two most positive outcomes of alternative assessment.

Positive experiences for students. Most of the graduate students had prior experiences using reflective journals, learning logs, or portfolios. Control and mastery of learning through self-evaluation and goal setting, attitude improvement, and awareness of oneself as a learner (metacognitive awareness) all were identified as positive outcomes of using these types of assessment tools with students.

Classroom practices such as self-selection, self-reflection, and learning goals are powerful aspects of portfolio assessment and are a means for students to take control of their learning and to develop positive attitudes toward learning. Course participants' comments about the power of alternative assessment included:

The heart of alternative assessment is valuing students from their point of view and encouraging them to be aware of what they have learned and still need to work on. Students set goals for themselves, select work that demonstrates what they have learned, and are able to explain why they chose it. Students take a greater responsibility for their own learning.

Implementing alternative assessment measures in the classroom has the potential to create a positive experience for students and, in turn, produce positive attitudes. Using portfolios is very important to me. I think it makes a difference in many of my students' attitudes toward reading, writing, and school in general.

Developing metacognitive awareness in students is another outgrowth of using alternative assessment. One course participant noted:

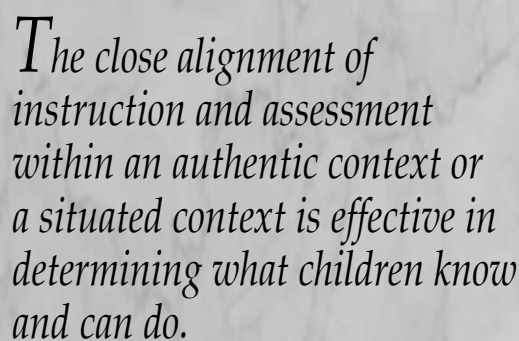
Alternative assessment appears to not only be the most effective way to test individual knowledge, but the best way for students to understand their own learning process which promotes their academic growth in a very personal way.

Metacognitive awareness also was mentioned in conjunction with students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. One graduate student explained:

The biggest benefit that alternative assessment provides is the sense students have of themselves and the learning that they acquire. Without this type of assessment, that is overlooked. I also see a huge benefit as being able to understand exactly what they know and don't know. Other assessments can blur this image and give false readings about students' knowledge. Alternative assessment makes this more visible and, therefore, makes teaching more tailored for minority students.

Responsive instruction. Alternative assessment measures are a rich source of information about the student's level of achievement. Responsive effective instruction predicated on this type of information takes on the following qualities: awareness of student abilities and capabilities, reflective teaching and improved instruction, and culturally responsive classroom practices.

Alternative assessment's ability to offer the teacher a holistic picture of student capabilities was noted. One graduate student juxtaposed testing with alternative assessment and found testing to come up short in revealing abilities and capabilities of students.



The close alignment of instruction and assessment within an authentic context or a situated context is effective in determining what children know and can do.

As a teacher, it is vital for me to know as much as possible about each of my students to offer him or her the very best education, tailored to his or her individual abilities, needs, strengths, and weaknesses. Standardized evaluations do not offer such information; alternative assessment tools do.

Another course participant reflected on how assessment practices ultimately serve to inform the teacher of what he or she still needs to do to promote student achievement.

Alternative assessment is wonderful for all kids because teachers have an opportunity to truly understand what children are capable of as learners. Teachers have greater opportunity to create authentic and appropriate learning experiences with students. I feel that alternative means of assessing students are the most appropriate ways to create a true learning environment and genuine learning.

The connection between a specific form of alternative assessment and how it helped the teacher better understand what her students had learned was made by another graduate student.

A teacher that I am in close contact with has used learning logs in her classrooms for quite a while. She uses them to see what the children have learned from past lessons, books, or things that they have heard from peers or adults. Drawing and artistic creativity are always welcome in the learning logs. Students can record what they have learned in their own unique style. I have seen that the students are very excited to record important things that they have learned throughout the day or week.

Alternative assessment has the potential to reverse the traditional paradigm of student passivity and replace it with student initiative, self-discipline, and choice.

In terms of culturally responsive classroom practices, one graduate student suggested the use of student-generated rubrics to enable all children, especially language-minority children, to understand learning expectations. This idea presupposes that the teacher will help English-language learners develop and understand the language of the rubric.

The minority child will be familiar with the classroom language that is used to evaluate him or her. In setting up a rubric, the class gives input on what is important to evaluate. The child's knowledge base is valued and given consideration.

Another course participant addressed the sociocultural aspects of assessment and students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, alluding to what is often a "deficit" view, rather than a "difference" view.

This type of assessment is individualized. Students take on more responsibility for learning and staying accountable. Diverse students get to show us what they have learned, rather than having to suffer through a standardized assessment that might be culturally biased. Teachers of diverse students using alternative assessment hopefully see diverse learners as different rather than deficit.

Obstacles

Graduate students also noted obstacles or impediments for implementing alternative assessment in the classroom. Both external and internal constraints were factors in their views.

External constraints. Impediments to alternative assessments, such as lack of administrative and parental support and preoccupation with test scores, typically are generated outside the immediate classroom.

One graduate student expressed her hesitancy about implementing alternative measures because of perceived lack of support from others.

The obvious constraint to implementing alternative assessment in my classroom would be the school itself. I may encounter a principal that emphasizes teaching to the test. It also may be challenging to work with other teachers if they do not support alternative assessment. Parents may be hesitant to see this kind of assessment being used with their child. I will have to prove that it works in my classroom.

Another individual reported that preoccupation with test scores was a detriment to more effective teaching.

The system as we currently see it is berserk over numbers! This is the biggest drawback. At the schools where I work, the administration is so totally focused on the new state test that they have tunnel vision. I think there will have to be some compromise between doing what the administration feels is necessary and doing what I know is good practice.

Internal constraints. Internal constraints stem from within the classroom and relate to issues such as concerns about student motivation; lack of traditional classroom organization; insufficient time, money, and resources; and limited English proficiency.

One graduate student cited the difficulty of transforming students who are accustomed to teacher-directed activities. Their traditional views of learning may not include self-initiative and self-reliance; thus their motivation to engage in personal reflection and portfolio construction is lacking.

The hardest part is teaching the students to participate and take responsibility for their own learning. Most students are used to taking a passive role in learning, and it is sometimes difficult to get them to be more responsive and participatory in alternative assessment activities.

Ongoing collection of portfolios and continuous reflection activities require student involvement and an individual effort to keep track of learning. One course participant noted:

Minority students sometimes struggle with motivation in the classroom. I see alternative assessments, such as portfolios, being a struggle for students who lack motivation.

Though the basis for her opinion is unknown, another individual suggested that students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds need more structure and direct instruction.

There are probably a few drawbacks for minority students when it comes to alternative assessment. I think that structure would be one of the main issues. Minority students may need the structure of a traditional classroom, with its tests and concrete feedback.

The need to purchase materials, such as books and portfolio collection folders, when alternative assessments are used in the classroom was noted. One individual spoke of the excessive amount of time required for student interviews, which is one type of alternative assessment.

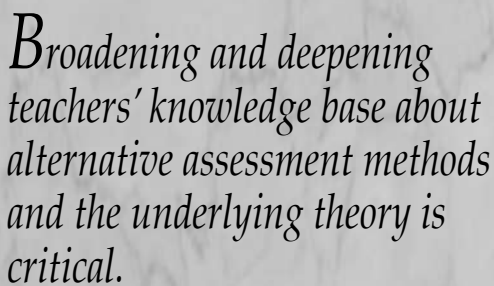
I did not have time to sit down individually with each student to do informal interviews. Students or other teachers were always interrupting me. By the time I finished interviewing all of the students, four weeks had passed, and it seemed as though the interviews were not valid anymore. Time and other duties were major conflicts.

Conclusion

One of the important aspects of implementing alternative assessment is knowledge about the theory that undergirds and supports various assessment means and the benefits to both students and teachers. The use of portfolios or other alternative assessment tools requires a theoretical knowledge base about the purpose underlying their use, such as responsive teaching and children's metacognitive awareness of their own accomplishments and future learning goals.

The alignment with theory appeared evident in the thinking of many of these graduate students. Their mention of positive student outcomes was encouraging and reflected their attention to learner-centered instruction. This alignment bodes well for current and future implementation of alternative assessment in their classrooms.

Broadening and deepening teachers' knowledge base about alternative assessment methods and the underlying theory is critical. Offering preservice and in-service teachers the "how to do" as well as the "how to think" would enhance teacher preparation and development and reinforce the status of teachers as professionals who are able to engage in reflective decision making.



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In the assessment courses the authors offer, the primary focus is on the theoretical framework and, as part of the course work, students generate portfolios that serve as evidence of their knowledge base. The process and product become prototypical for application in their classrooms. Course participants have indicated that they understand how to better implement portfolios with their students after completing their own; they can better grasp the meaning of student empowerment.

Obstacles in implementing alternative assessment are worthy of attention. School, district, and state administrators' preoccupation with test scores is a prevailing obstacle. Though these groups may seem unlikely to change their view of testing and alterna-

tive assessment in the near future, teacher educators must continue to advocate for the primary objective of assessment: to help students learn rather than to fail them (Serafini 2002; Stiggins 2002). As Serafini (2002, 83) stated:

Teachers need to 'step up' and challenge the current assessment paradigm. We need to question the traditional school structures and assessment practices that limit the possibilities of children, especially children from non-mainstream cultures. The more we can articulate our understandings of student learning to wider external audiences, the less these audiences will have to rely on standardized tests to understand the quality of educational experiences provided in public schools.

One student made a personal connection to implementing alternative assessment. Using alternative assessment reminded her of working out in the gym. Though she knew that the effort would be difficult and she would be tired, she stated, "I cannot not do it" because the students need it. She added, "With knowledge comes responsibility. How could I learn all of these benefits and then choose not to use it?"

To support preservice and in-service teachers in their efforts to work within the current testing environment, practicing teachers are invited to visit the university classes to provide their insights. Practicing teachers who have completed the assessment courses and are gingerly or with whole-hearted resolution implementing various types of classroom-based assessment can lend support. Course participants always seem to be encouraged and emboldened when hearing about any degree of successful implementation.

Some obstacles mentioned by graduate students might only be perceptions, and constraints on implementation may not always exist. For example, some students noted a lack of parental support for alternative assessments. In the authors' experiences, parents not only welcomed the idea of portfolios, but actively contributed their reflections. As noted in the literature, other teachers and researchers in this country have successfully involved parents in children's portfolios (Valencia 1998; Paratore et al. 1999).

Some teachers in the courses also expressed fear about their colleagues' lack of support. They were afraid that they might be isolated by coworkers who do not support alternative assessment. Serafini (2002) encouraged dialogue among teachers in which they can exchange their concerns, insights, and experiences. E-mail discussion groups and dialogue with practicing reflective teachers who have made the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction are useful tools.

The authors concur with Serafini (2002, 82) that we need to "break the stranglehold that standardized testing has on public schools in America" and to focus on the educational needs of individual students—something alternative assessment can begin to accomplish. The need to have the type of students Graves (2002) described—lifelong learners who possess the "freedom factors" of initiative, choice, vision, self-discipline, compassion, trust, and spontaneity—is critical. Knowledge about alternative assessment and support for the theory and practice can help the development of learners with these qualities.

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