

Extract from forthcoming publication: *The Future of Assessment*

Rethinking, aligning and rebalancing assessment

The above is a brief summary of some of the specific ways in which new thinking and digital technologies are transforming assessment and overcoming current barriers and limitations.

In the case of formal assessment programs created for the purposes of certifying student achievement or for accountability purposes, these changes offer the prospect of:

- ensuring that all of the outcomes we really value get assessed;
- tailoring assessments to the ability of each student, thus achieving more accurate measurement across the full spectrum of student performance;
- obtaining a more rounded, multidimensional picture of the achievements and talents of each student and with the longer-term prospect of prospect of individually tailored tests and examinations that can be taken on demand as part of a system in which assessment is continuous;
- automation of many current time-consuming processes that get in the way of timely availability of results and greater flexibility as to when assessments can be administered, including anytime anywhere assessment;
- more rigorous monitoring of standards and continuous benchmarking of performance.

In the case of assessment carried out as part of the on-going process of learning and teaching, changes underway offer the prospect of:

- redefining formative assessment and realizing its full potential to generate powerful feedback to optimize learning and teaching on a day-to-day basis;
- conceptualizing assessment as an integral and vital part of learning systems designed to deliver personalized learning and that themselves learn as they generate more information and new knowledge.

That's quite an impressive list, but does it add up to an assessment renaissance? We believe that it does, but only if we are prepared to rethink some of the purposes to which assessment is put, to seek a better alignment between assessment with curriculum and teaching, and to rebalance assessment priorities.

An integrated, multi-level view of assessment

Perhaps the most urgent need right now in the field of assessment is an overall conceptual framework and longer-term vision for its place and purpose within the core instructional triad. We believe that the starting point is to think of assessment in an integrated, multi-level way, which, building upon Rick Stiggins and Dale Duke¹, and drawing upon an earlier piece one of us penned², we represent as a three-level pyramid, as shown diagrammatically in Figure 4.

¹ Stiggins, R. & Duke, D. (2008). Effective instructional leadership requires assessment leadership. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 90 (4), 285-291.

² Hill, P.W. (2010). Using assessment data to lead teaching and learning. In A.M. Blankstein, P.D. Houston, & R.W. Cole (Eds.) *Data-Enhanced Leadership: Using What You Know to Be a More Effective Leader*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 31-50.

Rather than focusing on discrete assessment programs, we would suggest that it is more productive to view assessment as serving distinct data needs at three levels: the teacher-student interface (traditionally the classroom), the school and the system. The most important level is the teacher-student interface level, because this is the level where learning takes place and at which there is the greatest need for assessment data to enable a truly personalized approach to learning and teaching. We would argue that it is on assessment carried out at this level that other levels and purposes of assessment should build.

Next is the school level, which is the level at which education is managed and delivered. Schools need to draw upon assessment data, including data collected at all three levels, to evaluate their performance, to be accountable to parents for the progress of their students, and to manage learning and teaching within the school. This involves using assessment for both summative and formative purposes in addressing key questions such as “How are we doing relative to other schools and are we improving?” “How successful are we in teaching the intended curriculum?” Which students, classrooms and teachers need extra support?”

At the top of the pyramid, is the system that sets the policy and resourcing context for the schools it serves. Systems needs assessment data for macro-level formative and summative purposes, including evaluating policies and programs, identifying priorities and support needs, certifying student achievement, holding to account and in turn being accountable for the performance of the system as a whole.

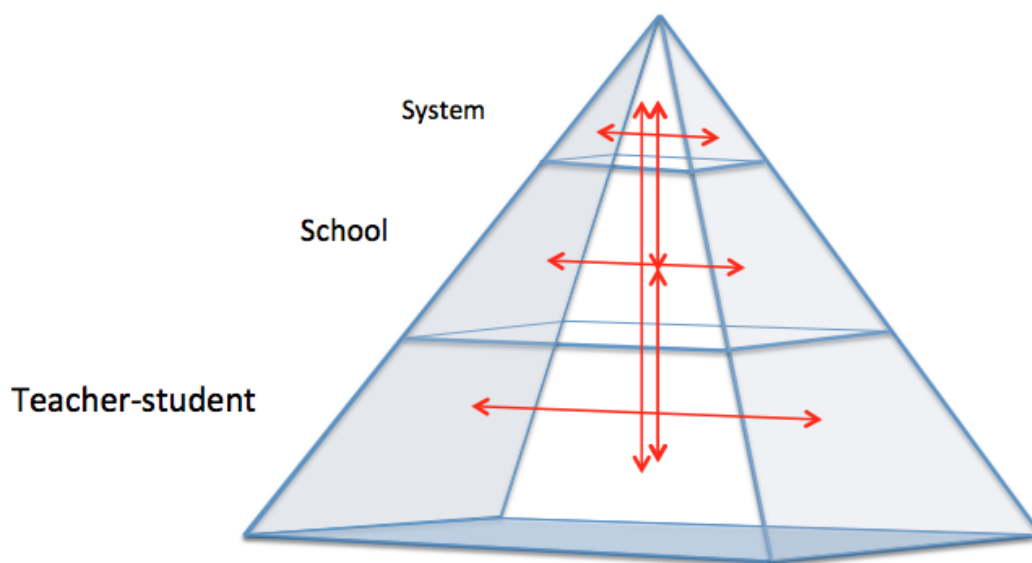


Figure 4. Tri-level assessment model

Within this tri-level assessment model, we envisage much greater vertical and horizontal flows of information among and within the three levels than currently occurs. We also see greater reliance by systems on assessment carried out at the lower levels, as the quality of assessment data collected at the teacher-student interface is improved.

New developments in assessment, online assessment environments and next generation learning systems provide the opportunity to re-balance assessment policies and practices so

that they build on quality assessment of student progress at the teacher-learner interface, are fully aligned with the curriculum and with pedagogies adapted to 21st century learning, and support new and more sophisticated forms of certification and multi-level accountability.

The challenge for awarding bodies

In considering the future of assessment for certification purposes, the challenge facing awarding bodies is to work out how they can take greater advantage of new technologies to deliver examinations online and by so doing enhance their capacity to:

- assess a wider range of valued outcomes;
- create more authentic assessment tasks;
- more accurately assess the full range of student abilities, speed up the process of marking student responses, including responses to extended response questions;
- open up the window of time in which examinations may be taken and work towards the longer-term goal of examinations on demand;
- use the potential of online assessment and developments in psychometric methods to more rigorously maintain standards and constantly benchmark them to ensure that these standards are world class.

Those awarding bodies that serve geographically confined local jurisdictions need to consider the implications of globalisation and whether they are able to compete in the emerging global qualifications marketplace, and whether they need to partner with other bodies in seeking to achieve world's best practice.

Certification needs to be conceptualised in ways that acknowledge the imperative for all to be competent continuous learners with the flexibility to respond to new life, work and study options and adapt successfully to rapid social, economic and technological change. Continuous learning clearly requires more dynamic approaches to certification and a greater willingness to seek to assess and report on development of more generic competencies and relevant life experiences, in addition to certification of formal learning.

The accountability challenges

In considering assessment for accountability purposes, the challenge for systems is to avoid or redress the mistake of implementing accountability systems that have high stakes consequences for individuals with decisions based primarily on results on short, poor quality tests that assess a relatively narrow segment of the curriculum. Such systems typically create perverse incentives, divert attention to trivial and away from serious objectives and from other more instructionally-relevant uses of assessment, accelerate consumer distrust and fail to deliver expected improvements.

Getting the balance right is a key challenge in many parts of the world right now, although what this means in detail will vary significantly from country to country. It is worth quoting again, but more extensively this time, from the Gordon Commission what they had to say with reference to the US context, because it has relevance to accountability testing in many other countries:

The Commission calls on policymakers at all levels to actively promote this badly needed transformation in current assessment practice. The first and most important step in the right direction will require a fundamental shift in thinking about the purposes of assessment. Throughout the long history of educational assessment in the United States, it has been seen by policymakers as a means of enforcing

accountability for the performance of teachers and schools... But, as long as that remains their primary purpose, assessments will never fully realize their potential to guide and inform teaching and learning. Accountability is not the problem. The problem is that other purposes of assessment, such as providing instructionally relevant feedback to teachers and students, get lost when the sole goal of states is to use them to obtain an estimate of how much students have learned in the course of a year. It is critical that the nation's leaders recognize that there are multiple purposes of assessment and that a better balance must be struck among them. The country must invest in the development of new types of assessments that work together in synergistic ways to effectively accomplish these different purposes — in essence, systems of assessment. Those systems must include tools that provide teachers with actionable information about their students and their practice in real time. We must also assure that, in serving accountability purposes, assessments external to the classroom will be designed and used to support high-quality education.³

In other words, balance and alignment are critical when it comes to uses of assessment.

The answer is neither to abandon the search for rigorous systems of accountability nor to impose them in spite of opposition from the profession, but rather to engage the profession in the design and implementation of systems that deserve and have their support.

An important avenue for building trust by the profession in accountability systems is through embracing the concept of *reciprocal accountability*, which Elmore states as implying that “For each unit of performance I demand of you, I have equal and reciprocal responsibility to provide you with a unit of capacity to produce that performance, if you do not already have that capacity.”⁴ The implications of reciprocal accountability for how systems and schools operate are substantial. Accountability is best thought of as a multi-level, shared, reciprocal process that all actors embrace.

Designing an effective accountability system involves clarifying who can and should be held to account for what at each level of the system and establishing accountability arrangements that are reasonable, effective and promote a shared trust in the system. This means being sure that accountabilities are within the power of the person or organization being held to account.

In the school educational context, it often means holding systems schools and teachers to account for doing the right things – those things that for which there is good evidence that they lead to improved outcomes-- rather than for the outcomes themselves, which may be only partly attributable to the specific person or organization being held to account. Direct accountability for outcomes is appropriate only in contexts where it is demonstrably the case that it has been possible to separate out the impact of those being held to account.

Having achieved agreement on accountabilities at different levels one can then begin to align it with a multi-level system of assessment that balances out and aligns the claims of different purposes of assessment.

Equally important in the design of accountability systems is the need to take into account capacity building requirements, particularly those related to teachers' assessment literacy

³ The Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education (2013). *A public policy statement*. Princeton, NJ: The Gordon Commission, pp. 7-8. Retrieval from: <http://www.gordoncommission.org/publicationsreports.html>

⁴ Elmore, R.F. (2004). *School reform from the inside out: Policy, practice and performance*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, pp. 244-245.

and their capacity to make full use of the potential of assessment data to provide feedback and enhance their capacity to deliver more effective and personalized forms of learning and teaching.

The challenge for learning and teaching

This takes us to the challenges inherent in seeking to transform assessment undertaken as part of the on-going process of learning and teaching. Earlier, we noted the prospect of addressing the limitations of the age-grade progression model and of realizing the potential of formative assessment in generating powerful feedback to optimize learning and teaching on a day-to-day basis. We suggested that this transformation would increasingly mean conceptualizing formative assessment as an integral and vital part of learning systems designed to deliver personalized learning. We also proposed that this kind of assessment should be primary building block for all other kinds of assessment.

Such a transformation, we believe, is vital in order to break through the performance ceiling, significantly improve outcomes and reduce achievement gaps. However, it demands a very big change in thinking, upending more than a century of practice. Furthermore, the learning systems and the technology to support this kind of assessment are still in an early developmental stage, so the transformation cannot be immediate. However, the transformation is already beginning to be manifest itself at the edges in a multitude of classrooms, typically as the result of the conviction and capacity of individual teachers, but sometimes with strong system support and direction. There is a growing consensus about the desirability of rejecting one-size fits-all in favour of a personalized approach to learning, so long as it is within current resource envelopes and can be shown to be feasible in typical classrooms. But there is considerable uncertainty about next steps in reaching that goal.

Becoming deeply involved in classroom assessment presents a challenge for systems that have tended to ignore such assessment as a policy matter that they need to become involved in. It raises questions concerning the kind of research and development needed to underpin quality assessment at this level and the systems required to collect and analyse the data such assessment provides to generate feedback into the learning and teaching process. It also raises big issues about teacher development and teacher capacity to operate in a digital classroom in which the goal is personalized learning, in which there is increasing integration of the various components of classroom activity within learning systems and in which the teacher's role changes significantly and potentially in the direction of a more professional role.

How does one prepare for such a future? As we noted at the beginning of this book, we are on the verge of a radical change in thinking and practice regarding assessment in school education. However, the exact form these changes will take depends very much on how we anticipate, plan for and shape them. This is the question that we address in the final chapter.