

October 13, 2006

Achieving Balance in Student Assessment

Educators are often involved in professional dialogue about finding the proper “balance” in assessment practices. In the recent publication “Breakthrough”, Fullan, Hill, and Crévola add to this dialogue in a section called “Assessment for Learning.” They state that, “in an expert *instructional* system, the case-specific data consist of information on the previous and current status of learners.” (p.47).

They go on to say that, “Assessment for learning, as every teacher knows, is about obtaining feedback on the teaching and learning and using that feedback to further shape the instructional process and improve learning.” (p.47-48).

I certainly agree with these points. Our assessment practices must inform teachers in a way that helps them shape their instructional practices. Certainly, in our province there are many examples, and I will cite four at the end of this newsletter.

At the same time, I want to share some of the language we are using in our Ministry and provide an overview about how we are addressing the “balance” in our assessment practices.

Our definition of assessment is: assessment is the process of gathering evidence of what a student knows, understands, and is able to do. In B.C., assessment occurs at many different levels and for different purposes. Our Ministry recognizes that summative and formative assessment are necessary for assessing student progress and that both classroom assessment and large-scale assessment play an important role in improving student achievement.

Summative Assessment

Summative assessment is the attempt to summarize student learning at some point in time. Assessment *of* learning is another term for summative assessment. Summative assessment is used to identify the learning that has occurred, and report to parents and students about student progress in school. Summative assessment is generally done at the end of a unit, course or grade and can involve tests, projects or assignments (Earl, 2003, p.2).

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment or assessment *for* learning occurs when teachers feed information back to students in ways that enable the student to learn better, or when students can engage in a similar, self-reflective process. Assessment *for* learning shifts the emphasis from summative to formative assessment (Earl, 2003, p.4). Assessments are formative when the information is used to adapt teaching and learning to meet student needs.

Assessment *as* learning extends the role of formative assessment by emphasizing the role of the student in the assessment and learning process (Earl, 2003, p.5).

Classroom Assessment

As noted by Fullan et al, teachers use the information gained through classroom assessment for the purpose of planning for instruction, designing learning experiences, and identifying areas requiring increased focus and support. They also use assessment information for communicating with, and reporting to, parents.

Assessment in the classroom consists of both formative and summative assessment and a variety of methods. The B.C. Performance Standards tasks and rating scales, observations, projects, teacher-made tests and quizzes and portfolios are all examples of classroom assessment methods.

Large-scale Assessment

Large-scale assessment is another form of student assessment, which is group-administered and involves standardized administration procedures. Administration of these assessments is on a “large scale” in comparison to classroom assessments. It can allow for use of results at the provincial, district, school, and student levels.

Large-scale assessments tend to be summative and “assessments of learning”, although they can be designed to provide formative information for instructional purposes.

In B.C., large-scale assessment occurs at the school, district, provincial, national and international levels. District-wide writing assessments, the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) and provincial exams are examples of large-scale assessments, and their purposes may vary from certification, accountability, monitoring progress or end-of-term grading.

Authentic Assessment and How it is Used

The concept of “authentic assessment” became popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Authentic assessment refers to assessment tasks that evaluate students’ abilities in the real world and in school. Its aim is to assess many different kinds of abilities in contexts that closely resemble actual situations in which those abilities are used. Authentic assessment practices are where students are assessed and evaluated as they do science experiments, conduct research, write stories and letters, read and interpret literature, solve math problems that have real-world applications, discuss books, keep journals, and write, revise, and present a report to the class. Authentic assessment is sometimes referred to as “performance assessment”, “assessment in context” or “alternative assessment”.

What Levels of Assessment are Authentic?

When the term “authentic assessment” is used it is sometimes presented in opposition to more traditional forms of assessment such as a multiple-choice test. Additionally, because the term “authentic assessment” was most closely identified with assessment that occurs in the classroom, it was interpreted by some to mean that large-scale assessment was, therefore, not authentic.

However, as depicted in the table below, all forms of assessment (classroom and large-scale assessment) have their specific purposes, can involve authentic assessment tasks, and taken together, can complement one another. The complementary nature of these assessments is really the “balance” that we are working toward in our assessment practices in B.C.

Table 1: Level and Purpose of Student Assessment

Level of Assessment	Purposes Include	Examples
Large-scale	Accountability; placement; promotion; credentials; certification	FSA; Provincial Exams; District-wide Assessments; National and International Assessments
Classroom	Information for teachers’ instructional decisions; student self-monitoring; grading; reporting to parents and students	Observation, projects, teacher-made tests and quizzes, B.C. Performance Standards tasks and rating scales, worksheets, student-led conferences, self-assessment, portfolios, reflection and review of work

B.C. Examples of Authentic Assessment

The B.C. Performance Standards were developed to assist teachers in assessing, evaluating and monitoring student progress at the classroom level. The B.C. Performance Standards are excellent examples of authentic assessment, because they consist of actual student work and reflect common practices and typical performance tasks used in the classroom.

The FSA numeracy component is developed around themes and the questions have a problem-solving focus. The writing component includes some introductory information to engage students in a particular topic or theme.

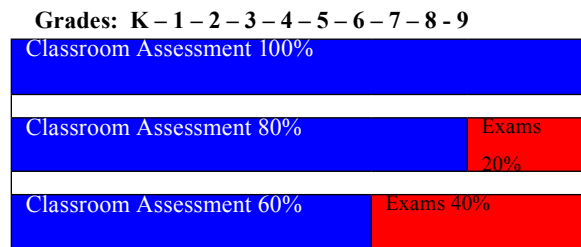
Speaking and listening components are being added to all B.C. Grade 12 second language exams. This ensures that these exams are more reflective of the curriculum and recognize other important skills beyond the basics of reading and writing.

Balancing Classroom and Large-scale Assessment

As I said earlier, in B.C. we encourage a balance between classroom assessment and large-scale assessment. Exams and assessments in this province are considered low to medium stakes for students. There is no requirement in B.C. that a student must pass an exam in order to graduate. For students on the 2004 Graduation program, students are only required to write five exams:

- Grade 10: science, math and language arts
- Grade 11: social studies (including BC First Nation Studies 12)
- Grade 12: language arts

As depicted in figure 1 below, at Grade 10 and 11, exams count for 20%. The other 80% is derived from assessment in the classroom. At Grade 12, the Language Arts 12 exam counts for 40%, and the other 60% of a student's mark is from assessment at the classroom level. In grades K-9, 100% of a student's mark comes from classroom assessment.



Below are examples of how four school districts are using a variety of assessment tools to support classroom instruction and also to inform district planning processes. These examples can be characterized as examples of district use of assessment "of" and "for" learning. This information is based upon the 2005-06 Accountability Contracts.

School District No. 70 (Alberni) is seeing an encouraging upward trend in the percentage of primary children reading at grade level. Results on the Grade 3 benchmarks assessment shows that the percentage of students at Grade 3 reading at grade level has increased from 76% in 2002 to 80.7% in 2005. Further, on each of the Grade 3 and 9 District Reading Comprehension Assessments (DART), the District achieved above the intended targeted goal.

School District No. 64 (Gulf Islands) continues to be proud of the results achieved by Grade 3 students completing the Reading Performance Standards. For three consecutive years, the District has achieved at or above the intended reading goal. For 2005, the percentage of Grade 3 students meeting expectations was 92%. The District is continuing to address closing the gap between the achievement of male and female students in reading by providing resource materials that incorporate boy-friendly genres. According to district data, the gap in performance between boys and girls in Grade 1 reading is 2%, down from 13% in 2003.

School District No. 40 (New Westminster) reports that local cohort data on reading performance gleaned from the Reading Assessment Record indicates significant progress is being made in areas such as drawing inferences, generating deeper level questions, and setting reading goals. For students in grades 4 and 7, the established targets of 88% for both grade levels as identified in the 2004-05 Accountability Contract were surpassed in both cases (i.e., 88% versus 91% for grade 4; 88% versus 95% for grade 7). The Reading Assessment Record is a locally designed assessment tool and is used to gather achievement data based on SMART Learning classroom instruction from cohort groups within the district.

These are four excellent examples of very careful, thoughtful work that connects the assessment of student learning with classroom practices and with provincial, district, and school decision-making processes. It is through the continued use of these practices that our province will continue to offer one of the best education systems in the world to the students of British Columbia.

Reading Assessment Record' Data for Grades 4 and 7

<i>GRADE</i>	<i>'03-'04 Target</i>	<i>'03-'04 Actual</i>	<i>Met/Not Met</i>	<i>'04-'05 Target</i>	<i>'04-'05 Actual</i>	<i>Met/Not Met</i>	<i>'05-'06 Target</i>
4	85	87	Met (Exceeded)	88	91	Met (Exceeded)	91
7	85	86	Met (Exceeded)	88	95	Met (Exceeded)	95

The objective of School District No. 44 (North Vancouver) is to increase the percentage of Kindergarten students who meet the expectations for numeracy readiness by the end of Kindergarten, using North Vancouver Kindergarten Numeracy Assessment. Their methodology is to assess all Kindergarten students in the district, using the North Vancouver Kindergarten Numeracy Assessment Package. They then provide intervention (Math 44 Teaching for Proficiency: Kindergarten) and retest at risk students to determine readiness for the Mathematics program in.

	Baseline:	Target:	Actual:
Timeline	January 2005	June 2005	June 2005
Results	Percent of kindergarten students who meet expectations for numeracy readiness • Numeracy readiness: 72%	At least 85 % of kindergarten students will meet expectations for numeracy readiness.	Percent of kindergarten students who meet expectations for numeracy readiness • Numeracy readiness: 88%

References:

Assessment of Learning, for Learning, and as Learning, Earl, L. (2003) Assessment as Learning: Using Classroom Assessment to Maximize Student Learning. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Fullan, M., Hill, P., Crévola, C. (2006) Breakthrough. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press