Traditionally, assessment is considered an outcome standard, used to evaluate student progress at the end of a teaching segment. Accordingly, student progress is assessed, and decisions are formulated that rarely impact actual curricular decisions. If assessment is used in such a way as to actually underlie the entire teaching process—from goal formulation to content acquisition, a thorough rethinking and actual systemic change can, and will occur. This view of assessment can prompt instructors to put more emphasis on linking disciplines through essential questions, placing academic endeavors in a real-world and authentic context that has meaning to the students. This in turn, will encourage thoughtful inquiry in depth, rather than rote learning across a broad, but shallow curriculum.

Assessment can exert powerful influences on behavior and can actually be used as a catalyst to change university organizational behavior, as well as classroom work. Fullan argues that change must be systemic, and coherent from top to bottom within school systems. Not only does the education system need to become more coherent internally, but relations with other systems need coherency, particularly economic and social (1996). This real world analogy is located directly within the realm of alternative, and more authentic assessment practices and procedures. In the university setting, as in the world outside these walls, universal goals seem to be the rule, which should apply to all students, even as the means to these goals will vary as these students (and citizens) themselves vary. School practices, tied to assessment, should be tailor-made to meet the needs of every group or class of students.

Alternative and authentic assessments represent a profound shift in attitudes toward the role of evaluation in learning. In effect, it is an entire paradigm shift, perceiving the power that assessment can have on all areas of the instructional and learning process. In this new paradigm, essential features directly replace old and outdated standards. Rather than one size fits all, instruction is based on individual student needs and goals. Students no longer are passive recipients of knowledge, but become active learners. The curriculum is no longer driven by textbooks, but by student interest and relevant themes. Where students have been expected
to work individually and competitively, they will now work cooperatively, with an emphasis on teamwork.

A shift toward the practice of authentic assessment can remedy the ills that have become inherent with the emphasis on traditional, high-stakes assessment. Historically, these types of traditional assessment tools place students in a passive role, rather than one that engages their capacities to produce ideas and solve problems. Authentic assessment is a term used to describe real tasks that require students to perform and/or produce knowledge rather than reproduce information others have discovered (Stefanek, 1991). In this context, an emphasis is placed on meaningful tasks, multiple assessments, higher order thinking, positive interaction, integration of knowledge, and self reflection and life-long learning.

I believe that one of most important, and exciting factors that stem from the use of authentic assessment is the instructional (and learning) component. In this sense, assessment can be used to actually plan and implement creative and relevant instruction, at the very highest levels of learning. It has been my personal experience that authentic assessment is an ideal compliment to instruction which meets the needs of all students at a variety of learning levels, within a single classroom.

I originally began using authentic assessment while teaching at the high school level, and it has become a staple assessment technique in my career as a university instructor. Students were, and continue to be highly motivated to complete higher order tasks in a quality manner, as they had a concrete representation of their efforts. I have been using this type of assessment in all my classes, with a diverse population of student interests and needs. It is an accurate representation of student outcomes and learning, but more important, it stimulated me to instruct in a more creative, relevant, and interesting manner; simply put, I became a better teacher.

One example of an authentic and alternative assessment device is the portfolio, in its various forms and representations. In my classroom, these portfolios are both a container of evidence of student skills and learning, but also a picture of their development through the school year. In essence, a test score in this context is merely a snapshot of a student on that particular day; these collections show how a student, and their work, has evolved over time. I also found that the actual process of my students collecting, refining, and subsequently evaluating their work provided powerful learning opportunities. For anyone passing by and just glancing in, my classroom often looks hectic. Yet, in the midst of this activity, students are plotting, organizing, questioning, answering- learning, as it actually occurs in life.

As a vehicle for development and use of authentic assessment, the portfolio is the concrete result: a collection of student work representing a selection of performance. Derived from the visual and performing arts, a portfolio is a representation of the students, their work, and their thinking; performance criteria inherent in the teaching/learning process can be represented
therein. In my mind, one beauty of a portfolio pedagogy is the fact that there is no single way to develop the program; students are expected to collect and select. This can be both a reflection of student and teacher personality and style, adhering to respective strengths, yet creating an environment to improve on areas of weakness.

At its core, portfolios are the truest evaluative tool of the actual process of learning, an integral component of higher level instruction and learning. In actuality, a portfolio is indeed a process, one that enables students to become active and thoughtful learners. Students benefit from an awareness of the processes and strategies involved in writing, solving a problem, researching a topic, analyzing information, or describing their own observations. When the schools become too dependent on traditional assessment devices, teaching and learning ignores this important component. Without instruction focused on the processes and strategies that underlie performance of these types of work, students will not have the opportunities to learn these essential skills, nor to carry them forward into new and appropriate contexts.

I have noticed that the portfolio process is ongoing, replicating the actual learning scenario as it proceeds through school, and life. Similar to writing a poem, you cannot begin at the end with a final copy. In fact, there really is not a final copy in a portfolio pedagogy, but a work in progress. Does authentic assessment and portfolios specifically drive instruction? In actuality, portfolios become an intersection of instruction and assessment. Together, instruction and assessment give more than either can give separately.

My work at the university level has motivated me to expand the portfolio and to proceed further with authentic assessment, to further meet student needs, and to retain my relevancy and vitality as an instructor. I plan on pursuing instruction in skills to develop electronic portfolios, both for myself and to instruct students at this university. Electronic portfolios allow the teacher to efficiently manage textual, sound, image, and even video information produced, refined, and collected by each student. Furthermore, it is an ideal way to integrate applicable technology into the classroom, providing for real outcomes for each student.

A systemic effect that embraces the pedagogy of authentic assessment will have a profound affect on both instruction and student learning. In looking at real world outcomes, students need to perform a task, demonstrate a skill, or produce a product that shows what they know and can do rather than take a one-dimensional test, that may only show what they can memorize. Teachers and instructors can use this type of assessment to actually assess their own teaching. The real change occurs when students are able to learn how to learn, and thus teach themselves.
References


