The Cultural Context of Assessment

In order to fully comprehend how assessment is used today, we must take a look at its origin. We first need to focus on the history of assessment in America. Like other things, assessments have an eminent past that we will carefully scrutinize before we move ahead.

It all began with the curriculum of social efficiency, hereditarian theory of intelligence with associationist & behaviorist learning theories, and scientific measurement. These theories helped to characterize the dominant 20th century paradigm. We need to clearly understand where these views on testing came from. The dominant theories of the past will help to shape and affect present ones.

One hundred years ago, various recall, completion, matching and multiple-choice test types, together with some essay questions fit closely with what was deemed important to know and learn. To ensure fairness, teachers believed that assessments had to be uniformly administered amongst all students. Teachers were hesitant in conducting individualized assessments with below-grade-level readers. However, does this truly prove to be fair?

Let’s all take a trip down memory lane. We will look briefly at when large-scale assessment occurred, and how it has progressed throughout the years. College entrance essays and interviews first initiated large-scale assessment in
the 1880s to 1920s. Then, from 1910 to the 1920s, large-scale testing for the army/navy and alpha-beta tests arose. In the 1920s to 1930s, the Student Aptitude Tests (SATs) came about. In the 1960s, the Title I Evaluation and Reporting System (TIERS) focused on norm-referenced tests. The 1970s to early 1980s brought about the Minimum Competency Testing (MCTs). Following, in the 1980s to early 1990s, the key focus was on accountability, assessments and quality. Finally, beginning in the 1990s to today, standards-based assessment and accountability came in to play.

Now that we looked at the history of assessment, lets look into the uses and users of assessment today. The primary level of use of assessment is in the classroom. Students, teachers, and parents gather and use the results of student assessments. The next level is that of instructional support. A perfect example of a user would be the school principal. The principal and other decision makers at this level provide teachers with what they may need when it comes to curricular, professional development and/or resource support. The final level of assessment user is policy makers, which include the superintendent, the school board, public officials, and citizens of the community.

As you can see, students definitely count on many people at different levels and in all decision-making contexts to use assessment results productively. We must maintain a balanced perspective about assessment’s valuable role at all levels.
What about the abuses of assessments? The abuses of assessments deal with the negative effects of assessments. This will be looked at later on in the paper when I discuss bias and fairness.

Ok, let’s talk about validity, shall we? Assessment experts say that an assessment that accurately reflects its intended purpose is valid; it possesses the attribute of content validity. Teachers must understand what they are assessing in order to be successful. Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes.

With validity, comes the concept of bias. Stated previously, bias is closely related to a specific structure of abuse of assessments. Accurate assessment is free from bias. Tests should provide equal opportunity for all students to demonstrate their abilities and knowledge. Language, class, race, gender and culture play an important role here. If any of the characteristics mentioned above affect a student’s performance, then that test is considered bias.

When language, class, race, gender, and/or culture do affect student’s performance on “high-stakes” tests, we need to reexamine and restructure that test. For example, when it comes to a test being referred to as gender bias, men and women with the same ability levels tend to obtain different scores. Why does this occur and how can we detect it? Determining whether a college entrance test is biased involves using statistical techniques to calculate the predictive relationship separately for each gender.

Several studies (such as those reported by Rosser in The SAT Gender Gap) have found that, while women tend to earn lower scores than men on some
college entrance tests, they tend to have higher grade point averages during their first year of college. This could be due to either the predictive relationship between test scores and freshman GPAs are not the same for both genders or there is a systematic bias in the assignment of college grades.

How can we avoid bias in classroom-based assessment? First, we need to include all students in accountability calculations. We must consider language, class, race, gender and culture when doing this. Create a classroom environment that encourages interaction between all students. Examine curricular resources prior to having them in the classroom. This will help to eliminate bias. Review tests with other teachers in order to achieve optimal benefit. By looking over a test with another teacher, one can notice and eliminate more questions that contain any sorts of bias. Finally, encourage children to notice and appreciate their own identity. Whether they are black or white, male or female, American or Chinese, etc., they are all unique in their own way. However, we need to establish a sense of equity amongst all students in the classroom.

In conclusion, I will give suggestions for creating valid, classroom-based assessments, which support learning for all students. We need to first think of the students as the examiners, rather than the examinees all the time. Have them assess their own academic progress and use their results to their benefit. Make sure that assessment remains a regularly occurring process throughout the year with all students. Finally, assessments are basically always focuses on individual student’s excellence of specific material. You, as a teacher must set
specific standards of what is acceptable and what is not, if the assessments are
to show whether students have succeeded. If a teacher is productively able to
follow the suggestions mentioned above, he/she will have an easier time
assessing students in a clear and valid manner.
Bibliography

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Richard J. Stiggins, 2001

*Gender Bias and Fairness, ERIC Digest,*

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*Assessments and Accountability,*

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*The Role of Assessment in A Learning Culture*

Lorrie A. Shepard

Good Paper, you covered all the content, but some of the ideas were not completely developed (e.g. explaining how the different tests used over the years were subject to different types of abuse).

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