



# Rethinking the *Motivational* Dynamics of Productive Assessment

By Rick Stiggins

**M**ost of us grew up in schools assigned the mission of beginning to sort us into the various strata of our social and economic system by ranking us from the highest to the lowest achiever by the end of high school. So obviously and by design, our schools produced both winners and losers.

Recently, however, society has seen fit to change that mission. We have discovered that, if all schools do is rank students by the end of high school, the bottom third of that distribution (or more), plus all students who dropped out before being ranked, fail to develop the foundational reading, writing and math problem solving proficiencies required to survive in, let alone contribute to, an increasingly technical and complex culture. So, society has decided, schools must bring all students up to a certain level of competence in those arenas. We have defined that minimal level of proficiency our “academic achievement standards.” Schools are to be evaluated in terms of their ability to help all students become competent readers, writers and math problem solvers.

In the presentation that follows, I contend that this change in mission necessitates a fundamental rethinking of the role of assessment in the

schooling process. Because of the demand for universal competence, universal desire to learn is essential. Teachers must help all of their students become winners. This has not been our assessment legacy.

### **The Emotions of Our Assessment Legacy**

In the schools of our youth, the winners and losers experienced fundamentally different assessment and grading realities. Those who scored high on assessments from the earliest grades gained confidence in themselves as learners. This confidence fueled a sense of optimism—the expectation of more success in the future. This, in turn, triggered a strong desire to continue to succeed and a high level of effort in the service of that agenda. A positive self-fulfilling prophecy began to unfold, yielding an ongoing record of academic success. Ultimately, they finished high in the rank order.

But, on the other hand, there were others who scored low on assessments from the outset. They lost confidence in themselves as learners. This lack of confidence fueled a sense of pessimism—an expectation of a negative result in the future. Hopelessness and a sense of futility reigned, robbing the stu-

dent of a sense that any effort was worthwhile. A negative self-fulfilling prophecy began to unfold, yielding an ongoing record of academic failure. Of course, they finished very low in the rank order—if they stayed in school.

So if some students worked hard and learned a lot, that was good because they would occupy places high in the ranking. But in addition, if some student gave up in hopelessness and stopped trying, that was a good thing too, because they would occupy places low in the ranking. The broader the spread in achievement from the top to the bottom, the more dependable would be the rank order.

Seen from another perspective, if a student gave up and stopped trying—that is, began to fail chronically—we regarded that as the student’s problem to deal with, not the school’s. We taught it, they just chose not to learn it. Our accountability was to provide the opportunity for students to learn. If they failed to take advantage of that opportunity, that was their responsibility. We warned them...

### **But in Standards-driven Schools...**

Now consider these emotional dynamics in light of the change in mission described above. Rather than merely sorting, schools are to help all students become competent at some

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level; that is, meet academic achievement standards. Laws are passed and regulations approved at the highest political levels holding schools accountable for making sure all students learn. New higher levels of achievement are expected, as we “raise the bar” to “world class standards,” and attach “high stakes” to test scores.

In this case, as above, those students who would have experienced a high level of academic success under the old regime will do well here also. Their confidence and optimism permit them to take the risk of trying with even more gusto to attain new higher levels of learning. They present no new or real challenges to their teachers as they rise to competence. Schools continue to be effective for them, as under the old regime.

However, those students who are academically challenged present a very real dilemma under the new mission. We cannot have them giving up in hopelessness if they have not yet met standards. If they believe standards are beyond reach they will stop trying. We can no longer permit that to happen. Our accountability is no longer merely to provide the opportunity to learn—we must provide the learning. Failure is no longer an option.

The problem is that the assessment, evaluating and grading practices of our youth—that is, those specifically designed to permit only a few to succeed—now must be revised to permit all students to succeed, at least at some level. This changes everything when it comes to assessment.

### **Assessment FOR Learning**

Essentially, procedures that permitted (perhaps even encouraged) some students to give up in hopelessness now must be replaced by those that promote learning success for all. In short, the entire emotional environment surrounding the prospect of

being evaluated must change, especially for perennial low achievers.

The driving motivational force can no longer be competition for an artificial scarcity of success. Because all can and must succeed at some level, confidence and optimism (previously the emotions of winners only) must rule for all. Every student must believe that, “I am in control of my own success and I am succeeding at learning because of my good work.” The foundation of this belief within them is continuous classroom assessment providing them with credible evidence of their own academic success. Our students must see and understand the achievement target from the very beginning of the learning, and we use assessment to permit them to watch themselves growing and succeeding.

In our work at the Assessment Training Institute, we call this assessment FOR learning (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis and Chappuis, 2004), a concept that heralds a very exciting new vision of the relationship between assessment and the emotions of student success. With assessment FOR learning, all students can experience the ongoing joy and expectation of success; that is, optimism. In this way, no child need be left behind.

Traditionally, we have used assessments to discover how much our students have learned up to a particular point in time. Evidence from these assessments, our effective schools models tell us, are to be fed to the adults in the system, as outlined above, so they can make informed instructional decisions to help students. This certainly makes sense in terms of school improvement under certain conditions. In our work at ATI, we call this assessment OF learning.

But what if we supplement it with assessment FOR learning, asking, how can we use the assessment process, not merely to gauge student

learning, but to cause students to learn more; that is, to increase achievement? To accomplish this, we use assessment to inform students about themselves. Further, if assessments OF learning check to see if our students are meeting standards (state, district or classroom), assessments FOR learning ask if our students are making progress toward meeting those standards (day to day in the classroom—during the learning). One is for accountability, while the other is used to support learning. Both are important, but they are different because they serve fundamentally different purposes. The key to our collective success as educators is to balance the two—to find the synergy between them.

Examples of assessments OF learning arise from our legacy: externally imposed standardized tests like college admissions tests, state assessments, district-wide tests, etc. They also include classroom assessments used to assign report card grades such as unit tests, final exams, and the like. These are assessments conducted after learning has occurred to determine if it has. They inform multiple levels of accountability and important instructional decisions and, therefore, are important.

Examples of assessments FOR learning are those that we use to diagnose student needs, merely for practice, or to help students watch themselves improving over time. In all cases, we seek to provide teachers and students with the kinds of information they need to make decisions that promote continued learning. Assessments FOR learning happen while the learning is happening—throughout the learning process. So early in the learning, students’ scores will not be high. This is not failure—it simply represents where students are now in their ongoing journey to ultimate success.

The teacher’s role in assessment

OF learning is as it always has been: administer accurate assessments and use sound grading practices. But in assessment FOR learning, this role changes. The teacher's role is to complete the following progression:

1. Start by clearly understanding the standard to be mastered,
2. Deconstruct it into the enabling classroom achievement targets that form the foundations of learning leading up to the standard,
3. Create a student-friendly version of those targets to share with students from the beginning of the learning,
4. Create high quality assessments of those classroom targets, and
5. Use those in collaboration with students to track improvement over time.

The student's role in assessment OF learning is as it always has been: study hard and strive for the highest score. Demonstrate competence. But in assessment FOR learning the student's role is to strive to understand what success looks like and to use each assessment to try to understand how to do better the next time. Everything centers on getting better over time with the student as a key player in the ongoing assessment process and record keeping process.

This leads to a fundamental redefinition of the relationship between assessment and student motivation.

Rather than relying on assessment as the source of information upon which to decide who gets rewarded and punished—that is, for determining the winners and losers—we use assessment as a road map from start to ultimate success. Success at learning becomes its own reward, promoting confidence and persistence. This changes the emotional dynamics in immensely productive ways for all students, especially for those who have not yet met standards.

Both assessment OF and FOR

learning are important, but their purposes (users and uses) are different. We tap the full potential of assessment as a school improvement tool when we find the synergy between the two, when we find ways to make them work in harmony with each other in the service of student success. Our aspiration should be to create learning environments characterized by a continuous array of classroom assessments FOR learning punctuated by periodic classroom and standardized assessments OF learning. Assessment

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