THE ROLE OF INSTRUCTIONAL ASSESSMENT AND TEACHER ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

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Abstract

Graue's (1993) description of instructional assessment endorses the social constructivist frame-work for learning proposed by Lorrie Shepard and challenges traditional classroom assessment philosophies. In this framework, teachers view instructional assessment as a way to assess their own instruction by exploring the nature, structure, and products of their teaching. Furthermore, teachers continually explore and interpret student learning within their everyday instructional processes. Thus, instructional assessment is a reflective activity that informs instruction and has a broader purpose than the summative evaluation of student performance or the assignment of a grade. Over the past few years, this author have worked with a number of teachers to design instructional assessment plans that align to state content standards. In particular, this author spent time with a group of six middle school teachers over a three month span. After delivering a two day workshop to this group of six middle school teachers, the group met weekly for three months during their common planning periods. The workshop covered the design and imple-mentation of performance assessment rubrics while the planning sessions included discussions on ways that they could instructionally assess their students. During these meetings the group designed instruction by creating performance assessments that would be used to augment their students learning processes. Certain barriers in teacher assessment practices hindered the prac-tice of instructional assessment in their classrooms. These barriers stemmed from traditional teaching philosophies and focused on four areas: (a) enhancing student learning, (b) aligning instruction and assessment purposes, (c) applying principles of validity, and (d) preparing stu-dents for standardized tests. This article describes how instructional assessment could be applied in classrooms to foster student learning while providing summaries of the discussions middle school teachers had about the four areas above that delayed them from blending instruction and assessment.

Instructional Assessment Framework

In her recent manuscript, *The Role of Assessment in a Learning Culture*, Shepard (2000) advocated that teacher educators and practitioners need to re-conceptualize classroom assessment by linking it to contemporary visions of pedagogy. Shepard contrasted an emergent paradigm of learning theory to a 20th century dominant paradigm where representa-tions of scientific measurement were closely aligned with traditional curricula and beliefs about learning. This traditional paradigm was identified with associationist and behaviorist learning theories. Shepard continued to introduce a need to dissolve the old paradigm by re-thinking new views of instruction that rely on what she called a "social constructivist" con-ceptual framework, which integrates cognitive, constructivist, and sociocultural theories.

Shepard summarized contemporary understandings about learning that differ from the views of the traditional paradigm:

> From cognitive theory we have learned that existing knowledge structures and beliefs work to enable or impede new learning, that intelligent thought involves self-monitoring and awareness, about when and how to use skills, and that expertise develops in a field of study as a principled and coherent way of thinking, and representing problems, not just as an accumulation of information.... [From Vygotsky (1978) we learn] that cognitive abilities are "developed" through socially supported interactions. (p. 6)

The impetus for contrasting these paradigms came from Graue's (1993) manuscript, *Integrating Theory and Practice through Instructional Assessment*. Like Shepard, Graue claimed that students create meaning in a learning context of social, cultural, and economic issues. Graue proposed that teachers depend on their philosophies about teaching, learning, and assessment when responding to students (Graue, 1993). Thus, in a constructivist learning environment, teachers value enhancing student learning when assessment becomes part of their pedagogical processes rather than remaining isolated from instruction.

Both Graue (1993) and Shepard (2000) argued that teacher educators and practitioners who view learning from a traditional perspective create barriers for student learning when they approach instruction and assessment as separate processes. Traditional measurement strategies fail to consider the kinds of assessment activities needed in constructivist learning environments (Graue, 1993; Shepard, 2000; Statyer & Johnston, 1996). In traditional environments, learning is viewed as a mechanistic process of breaking knowledge into small units for students to absorb and memorize. In contrast, students who participate in a constructivist learning environment assemble their own meanings of knowledge that depend on the social and cultural context of a learning situation (Mislevy, 1993; Shepard, 2000, 1991). Within this environment, teachers choose assessment strategies that blend with their instruction to enhance learning.

Shepard (2000) claimed to use assessment as an instructional strategy: "We [teacher educators and practitioners] have not only to make assessment more informative, more insightfully tied to learning steps, but at the same time we must change the social meaning of evaluation" (p. 10). Statyer and Johnston (1996) argued that teacher educators and practitioners should oppose assessment being isolated from instruction and viewed as an "objective, value-free, non-reactive activity" (p. 3). They encouraged educators to position assessment as an involving, reflective process that purposefully enhances student learning and serves as a tool for enriching instructional practices.

Instructional Assessment and Teacher Assessment Practices

Graue's (1993) description of instructional assessment endorsed the social constructivist framework for learning proposed by Shepard (2000) and challenges traditional classroom assessment philosophies. In this framework, teachers view instructional assessment as a way to assess their own instruction by exploring the nature, structure, and products of their teaching. Furthermore, teachers continually explore and interpret student learning within their everyday instructional processes. Thus, instructional assessment is a reflective activity that informs instruction and has a broader purpose than the summative evaluation of student performance or the assignment of a grade.

Over the past few years, the author has worked with a number of teachers to design instructional assessment plans that align to state content standards. In particular, the author spent time with a group of six middle school teachers over a three-month span. After delivering a two-day workshop to this group of six middle school teachers, the group met weekly for three months during their common planning periods. The workshop covered the design and

implementation of performance assessment rubrics, while the planning sessions included discussions on ways that they could instructionally assess their students. During these meetings, the group designed instruction by creating performance assessments that would be used to augment their students learning processes. Certain barriers in teacher assessment practices hindered the practice of instructional assessment in their classrooms. These barriers stemmed from traditional teaching philosophies and focused on four areas: (a) enhancing student learning, (b) aligning instruction and assessment purposes, (c) applying principles of validity, and (d) preparing students for standardized tests.

Enhancing Student Learning

In a social constructivist environment, teachers primarily focus on enhancing student learning by encouraging students to reason and problem solve as opposed to using assessment as a punishment and reward strategy. Teachers use assessment strategies that align with their instruction and provide students with continuous feedback that empowers them to evaluate their own learning processes prior to completing the final product. Students, thus, do not focus on deficits. Rather, they modify their actions to reach envisioned levels of expertise (Graue, 1993). In this environment, learning and assessment become more collaborative between teachers and students (Johnston, 1989) as opposed to students repeating information deemed relevant by the teachers. Graue (1993) claimed, "In the new learning framework, the student is an active constructor of knowledge . . . Students begin to take responsibility for understanding and communicating their own learning" (p. 298).

In many classrooms, teachers and others equate learning to the score students receive on external standardized tests and to the grade assigned in class even though measurement specialists have discovered discrepancies in the meaning of grades (Brookhart, 1993; Pilcher, 1994; Stiggins, Frisbie, & Griswold, 1989). Shepard challenged us to broaden our thinking about classroom assessment by viewing assessment as an instructional process that is used to support and enhance learning. Stiggins (1999) and Arter (1999) also supported this viewpoint and recommended that the *Standards for Teacher Competence in Educational Assessment of Students* (American Federation of Teachers, National Council of Measurement in Education, and National Education Association, 1990) expand to include competencies on aligning assessment to instructional purposes. To establish this viewpoint, Statyer and Johnston (1996) argued that assessment and instruction cannot have separate goals.

From their discussions with each other and the author, the middle school teachers clearly recognized that students learned more when they played a role in any assessment process. These teachers thought of this strategy as an instructional rather than an assessment activity. Thus, they viewed instruction and assessment as two separate entities with specific purposes. They constantly referred to what they had "taught" but seldom mentioned that they monitored the student's progress or made instructional decisions based on student learning. When the author prompted the conversation on evaluating student learning, they preferred to talk about teaching activities. Also, the teachers were more comfortable practicing pedagogical strategies they labeled "objective" and teacher controlled.

Aligning Instruction and Assessment Purposes

Graue (1993) proposed that a key attribute of productive instructional assessment is the alignment of assessment with the purposes of instruction. She also advocated that alignment requires more than matching curriculum to objectives. Assessments that are aligned to the curriculum explore all topics as the teacher uses multiple delivery strategies and encourages students to problem solve and reason as they are making sense of information and knowledge. Many teachers, however, are not accustomed to threading the assessment process throughout their instruction.

The middle school teachers centered their lesson planning around selecting "neat" activities for students and then aligning state standards to these activities. The activities supported

the daily topics and provided students with class exercises during a specified time period. For example a teacher wrote,

> In a "World of Weather" activity, cooperative groups of students will be responsible for researching an aspect of weather and preparing an oral presentation on their assigned topic. Each student is responsible for a visual aid to use during his/her explanation. Each group will present a global weather organization and will become "experts" on the assigned topic. Each group will participate in an oral presentation. Issues pertaining to weather will then be discussed.

Once the teacher wrote the activity, she then selected a number of state standards from the list that she considered to align to the activity. When discussing this activity, the teachers talked about strategies they would use to implement this activity in the classroom, claiming that the assessment component was the oral presentation. Prior to the design of this activity, they did not begin by discussing what they wanted students to learn, nor did they discuss strategies on how they would monitor each student's progress while completing the activity.

Statyer and Johnston (1996) opposed teachers' current practices of isolating assessment from instruction. They claimed that when teachers' goals are to actively involve students in composing and applying meaning within a learning context, "the activities of the classroom need to provide students with opportunities to question, to rethink, to redefine their thoughts, and to extend their understandings" (p. 8). Shepards' (2000) arguments supported this need and emphasized that classroom routine and corresponding assessments must foster the development of students' metacognitive abilities and social meanings they attach to learning. When teachers use multiple data sources to collect information on where students reside in a learning situation, teachers can then engage in a systematic analysis to monitor and modify their pedagogical strategies and ensure that students encounter opportunities for improving.

<u>Applying Principles of Validity</u>

The selected strategies for collecting information on student learning shape the evaluative information. One author recommended that the assessment tools must be relevant to the task at hand as she presents ways validity can be taught from the perspective of the decisions classroom teachers make instead of from a more purely psychometric viewpoint. Thus, defining validity shifts from focusing on assessment for measurement to assessment for instruction (Cole, 1988).

Graue (1993) claimed instructional assessment calls for new epistemological approaches to knowing students and their learning. Teachers are concerned with equity in opportunity rather than equality of outcomes (Graue, 1993). In the social constructivist framework defined by Shepard (2000), valid strategies must be useful to teachers and students. Graue (1993) explained that usefulness depends on how teachers apply varying assessment strategies to their students. Graue proposed that some assessment strategies fit some children better than others and that teachers should balance the use of multiple assessment strategies against individual student strengths and weaknesses. Teacher interpretations of information should be made on patterns among information sources, while avoiding heavily weighting single sources of information.

When discussing the use of multiple assessments in classrooms or varying the types of student assessments for students with different knowledge levels, the middle school teachers exhibited frustration. This strategy opposed their traditional, daily practices for assessing students and challenged their views on assessment purposes. Traditional beliefs about teaching continued to influence the classroom actions these teachers discussed, making it difficult for them to shift from a behaviorist to a social constructivist learning environment. These teachers abided by external measures of value rather than evaluating whether or not pedagogical strategies in classrooms were improving and supporting student learning. The middle school teachers thought that they should assess every student with the same tool and with the same

achievement expectations. They did admit that at times they were more lenient with those students who put forth effort but still failed to achieve at high levels.

Preparing Students for Standardized Tests

Applying instructional assessment strategies in a social constructivist learning environment create a challenging curriculum that embeds assessments to enhance and support learning for all students. Teacher practices aligned to these theoretical views follow closely with standards-based reform rhetoric (Shepard, 2000). Rather than solely aiming reform at outcomes, the focus is on the process of teaching while using student learning as a guide for modifying and adapting instructional practices.

Using student outcome scores on accountability tests, policymakers of standard-based reform have placed immense faith in a heavy-handed system of rewards and punishments (McLaughlin & Shepard, 1995). Shepard (2000) advocated that externally imposed testing programs have prevented thoughtful classroom assessment practices. Graue (1993) claimed "the prominence and political weight of these accountability tests in educational discussions have overshadowed ongoing assessment done by teachers, pushing it into the shadows" (p. 286). She promoted that reform needs to be aimed at the process of teaching rather than solely on student outcomes as measured by external tests. Similarly, Graue (1993) stated, "instruction and assessment are part of the professional responsibility of teaching, and these responsibilities are not recipe-oriented" (p. 286).

The application of the measurement-driven paradigm in the standards-based movement has triggered teachers to coach students to pass accountability tests. This type of learning environment teaches students that the rewards and punishments of their performance depend on external measurements rather than on their processes for problem-solving and reasoning to construct their own meaning of new knowledge and information. In this situation of intense political pressure, test scores are likely to rise without a corresponding improvement in student learning. Shepard (1989) explained that the form of the test can influence learning to the extent that instruction in the classroom becomes decontextualized and narrowly conceived, thus, potentially decreasing students' conceptual understandings.

The middle school teachers expressed the need to design assessment tools that resembled the types of items on the state accountability test. Teachers claimed that they selected tests from textbooks because publishers presented a series of test items for each lesson that aligned to the format of the state test. When referring to state accountability, teachers discussed the effect of these tests on student learning. The teachers did not feel that including state-like test items in their classes fostered achievement that was meaningful for students. Further, they believed that the amount of time they had to spend preparing students for the state tests took away from their "teaching" time.

Conclusion

From discussions with a group of middle school teachers, the author identified a number of barriers that prohibited these teachers from adopting a social constructivist understanding of learning and thus, implementing what Graue (1993) defined as instructional assessment. Graue (1993) proposed that prior to changing the purpose of classroom assessment to make it more fundamentally encompassing of the learning process, teachers must "acknowledge the power of these enduring and hidden beliefs" (p. 6). Educators claim teachers must reform traditional measurement ideas of classroom assessment to blend instruction and assessment in a social-constructivist learning environment (Cole, 1988; Graue, 1993; Shepard, 2000; Tittle, 1989). Teachers have experienced both measurement-driven assessment strategies through their own school experiences as well as in teacher education classrooms that include classroom assessment in the instruction.

Thus, Graue (1993) claimed that teachers cannot modify traditional beliefs and understandings on their own. Although some teachers have been exposed to additional classroom assessment material in college classrooms or workshops, little instruction has prepared them to make the necessary shifts when applying instructional assessment procedures in a social-constructivist learning environment. Furthermore, a typical day entails teachers interacting socially and instructionally with large numbers of students; meeting with other teachers, school officials, and parents; planning lessons and assessing student work; and participating in school improvement responsibilities. Given these duties, it is difficult for teachers to find the time and energy needed to produce new forms of pedagogical strategies that include assessment (Pilcher, 1994). The discussions with the middle school teachers most likely reflect other teachers' viewpoints who have been entrenched in traditional teaching practices they gained from both their teacher preparation programs and past schooling experiences as a student. This agenda warrants continued discussions with teachers to understand these and other barriers that keep them from practicing instructional assessment that focuses teaching purposes on student learning.. To change the social meaning of evaluating students using a social-constructivist perspective, teacher educators need to provide learning environments that challenge traditional measurement-driven ideas of assessment. Teachers, instructional decisions need to be guided by the progress their students make toward learning.

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