

Perspectives on Assessment

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Let me say a few words on the “hot” topic of assessment, because, as usual, I have some less-discussed perspectives — perspectives that some may find useful.

The first perspective is that I believe --- and a lot of smart people believe with me --- that we have overcomplicated the process of assessment far, far beyond where it should be. It’s not that we shouldn’t assess – assessment is useful in providing feedback and guidance going forward. The question, rather is *how* we assess, and, in particular, how complex and “fine-tuned” our assessments of students really need to be.

Assessment vs. Ranking

Other than specific feedback in specific cases, I believe what we only really ever need to assess is which of only three categories people fall into within whatever domain we are assessing: whether they are (1) “competent”, (2) “not competent” or (3) “outstanding.” (The words we use for these categories are unimportant.) Typically, the not competent and the outstanding comprise less than 15 percent of the population in question each, and the bulk of the people are, with a variously nuanced but acceptable degree, competent.

Everything else is “ranking”.

Ranking is far more difficult than just “assessment,” and, in most cases, is not worth the effort. It may add “something,” but little, if any, of that “something” is value.

A former boss of mine in business, a very top-level head of HR, who was on the executive committee of a very prominent investment bank and now works as a consultant to major firms around the world, pleasantly surprised me in our last meeting by emphasizing this very point. “People always want more levels,” he said. They fight for at least five.” (ABCDF, anyone?) “We really only need three.”

Interestingly, assessment of people --- students or employees — into the three categories of “not competent,” “competent” and “exceptional” is actually not very difficult for someone familiar with the domain in question – almost any experienced teacher, or supervisor can do it with (possibly) some questions at the margins that are resolvable via multiple opinions. Those three categories are all they have, for example, for assessment at the Harvard Business School.

But while assessment is relatively easy for experts, ranking is really hard.

Deciding whether somebody is 35th or 36th (or 319th or 320th) is an extremely difficult problem, one that can almost never be definitively resolved except in the most trivial of cases. It's almost always a judgment call, and even "professional" opinions will differ. So we devise "rubrics" — a word used, as far as I can tell only in education — that supposedly remove judgment, but really don't (Why 2 points off for this, 3 for that, and not the opposite?). We "train" people in assessment and statistics and hire PhD's to create the right "distractors" on tests to assist the ranking process. We create "bubble tests" that can be statistically evaluated and normed. But we still do a job that few are satisfied with. The reason is that while we care very much with the nuances within the "competent, ranking doesn't really measure them in a way that is helpful.

Remember, the provision and grading of "ranking tests is also a huge profit-making business — because it is costly, enormous amounts of money get spent, "education" money that hardly helps the kids' education at all. All the effort and expense is unnecessary.

So why do we do it?

Some think that we rank in order to make it easier for colleges and/or employers to separate out people. Actually, those places can do a pretty good job of that themselves. More and more they are moving in that direction, looking for "whole" people, who have "accomplished." This may currently be true more for private colleges and universities than public ones, but all are moving --- and basing the "matching" processes between students and colleges – or graduates and jobs -- on something other than test rankings is a whole lot better for everyone. The process of moving away from using ranking tests for admission and for hiring has already begun.

Some argue that rankings are "objective" and eliminate biases. Eliminating biases should always be our goal, but rankings are rarely, if ever, totally objective. In reality, the rankings do not actually eliminate the biases, because biased people always find a way around them.

So all this "ranking" is nonsense. It is *not* that with our huge expenditures of time, effort and money we *can't* do *some* kind of ranking job — we can and we do. It's rather that we really don't have to be doing this in order to assess either our education or our kids. Yet we have enormous opposition to getting rid of "ranking" tests — although lately the "opt-out" movement is growing.

Better Ways?

There are, essentially, only two ways to assess. Either you can ask someone questions (i.e. test them), or you can observe what a person does and produces. Lately, the second has come into more favor in K-12, particularly with the concept of digital portfolios. This is a good idea that has yet to find universal application, or to resolve many issues.

One college, the University of Mary Washington in Virginia, has come up with the interesting concept of "A Domain of One's Own." The idea is that each student is given their own domain on the university server, on which he or she can post anything they choose that they want others to see. This becomes their portfolio — and it also becomes their property. They can show it to anybody they like, and they take it with them when they graduate.

Mike Lawrence of CUE envisions something like this in K-12 as well. "Some schools think they should — or in some cases are required by law to — delete student portfolios when the students

graduate,” he says. “This shouldn’t be the case. Students may want to keep that work and show it to others for admission to college, for a job application or for other purposes. Once something is posted with the permission of students and parents it ought to be open to everybody the user grants access to and should last forever.” Lawrence and others lobbied successfully to change California’s laws to reflect this.

More and more people are coming to the conclusion that our current assessment practice of ranking via high-stakes testing is actually harmful to kids. The irony is that it is not something we need to do, because there are better assessment alternatives.

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