

Assessment for empowerment

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While thinking about the topic of assessment I recalled a story from the Ramayana as told by my grandmother. Since I am recalling this story from memory, allow me at the outset to apologize to scholars of the Ramayana if the way I remember the story does not quite find a match in literature. Without digressing further let me tell the story and then follow it up with why I feel it is relevant in the context of educational assessment. In their search for the abducted queen Sita, a group of Vanaras reached the southern seashore. Across the sea was Sri Lanka, and in order to find Sita the sea had to be crossed. Gazing on the vast expanse of water, the Vanaras considered the possibility of leaping over the waters. Members of the Vanara group began to estimate their ability to undertake the task at hand. Some of them said they could leap quarter the distance and others said they could manage half the distance. Angad, the Vanara crown prince then stepped forward and boldly declared that he would be able to leap right across, but would not have the strength to return. As the Vanaras stood uncertain of their next course of action, their wise old advisor, Jambavan spoke to Hanuman and told him that he alone had the capacity to leap the ocean and also return with news about Sita. Hanuman proved equal to the task and many further events unfolded before Sita was brought back. To my mind, this small sub-plot within the epic tale of Ramayana, can be seen as an example of how a wise use of assessment can serve as a tool for empowerment. The individual Vanaras were seriously engaged in self-assessment of their capacities and in general they seemed to be realistic in this as their claims were not challenged by Jambavan. However, in the case of Hanuman, who remained silent and unsure of his abilities, Jambavan was in a position to make a true assessment of his abilities and thus empower him to undertake the daunting task of crossing the ocean. How I wish that as classroom teachers we are expected to use assessment solely as a tool of empowerment – following in the steps of Jambavan!

However, most of us use assessment unthinkingly since it has become a naturalized and inevitable part of teaching. More often than not assessments are also used to evaluate students and grade them or sort them as being more able or less able in some given domains or some set of skills. In common parlance, assessment and evaluation are used synonymously indicating our general tendency as teachers to categorize students and label them. On many occasions the larger system requires teachers to do this and to clearly tell other stakeholders – parents, school boards, employers about the extent to which some desired knowledge or skill has been acquired by the pupils. A range of assessment and evaluation tools are routinely used by teachers and, although they are designed to test performance in specific areas the reports about these performances connote other meanings as well. Students themselves tend to read a great deal more than warranted into performance assessment which is usually reported in the form of marks or grades. They tell themselves things like, “I am not good at mathematics!” instead of something like, “I don’t seem to have understood how to calculate compound interest” or, “I am the best in English”, instead of “How could I make my essay interesting enough for my classmates to want to read it.” or “I know all about this topic in science”, instead of, “This is really interesting! I wonder if this is how it would work in...” The broad general conclusions that they draw from their test/exam grades are usually not focused or specific enough for them to take realistic actions to enhance their learning or improve their abilities in desired directions. Surprisingly teachers often come to similar conclusions about students based on test performances. This leads to students being labeled as high or low achievers according to perceptions that have little objective basis.

There is a fair amount of evidence from research suggesting that an emphasis on letter or number grades to assess students is counterproductive. Firstly, research indicates that “grade orientation” and “learning orientation” tend to pull in opposite directions and that students may end up using various shortcuts in order to get high grades instead of focusing on genuine learning. Secondly, grades tend to reduce students’ preference for challenging tasks and thirdly, grades tend to reduce creativity. There are more problems with grades – this time in terms of the reliability and validity of the grades awarded by teachers in the course of their classroom teaching. I worry all the time about the fairness with which I grade student work. No matter how much time I spend devising an “objective” set of criteria for grading, it ultimately boils down to my interpretation and subjective response to what the student has written. On the other hand a strictly objective type question paper does not allow me as a teacher to gauge the depth and quality of the students’ engagement with ideas and their ability to persuade me of their point of view. Unlike, the wise Jambavan, I am never completely sure of my assessment about a students’ work. I am acutely aware that it is quite possible that someone else may have assessed differently. I find myself picking up students’ work and assessing it again a second time and feel vastly relieved that I have awarded the same grade this time too. How would the student assess her own work? Would she agree with my assessment? These are questions that rise up as I plod steadily through end semester correction work – a painful and inevitable part of every teacher’s life I suppose. I envy Jambavan for in my mind’s eye I see him indulgently looking on as the brave Vanaras self-assessed their individual abilities. Next I see him patiently helping Hanuman to arrive at a realistic and empowering assessment of his enormous capability. How happy the outcome! All the Vanaras surely cheered as Hanuman leaped across the ocean. Yet, in the classroom I become aware of the tensions that assessment creates, even if it isn’t meant to stratify students. Students seem to become distrustful of the teacher or even worse of their own abilities when they receive a low grade. “It’s only this little essay/assignment/exam! It is not a comment on anything else. You are just as precious and valuable and wonderful as a person regardless of this stupid grade!” This is what I feel like telling the students and sometimes do tell them that. Grades create tensions between students too and then I feel like saying, “Hey, listen the purpose of learning is far greater than grades. Surely you can learn more from each other by cooperating instead of competing.” Sometimes I think students understand this and at other times I think they get too focused on the grades and that diminishes their joy of learning. Another difference between what Jambavan did and what we teachers often do comes to mind. Jambavan did not assess performance – there had not been any leaping exam for him to do that. Instead he assessed competence, based on his observations and interactions with the Vanara braves. When the time came he used his assessment to enable and empower, not to dishearten and de-

motivate. Basil Bernstein, one of the most powerful theorists about education distinguished between what he called the 'performance' and the 'competence' models of pedagogy. In the performance model the focus is on the specialization of subjects and skills and learning is structured in terms of selection, sequence and pace. The learner's performance is graded and stratified and evaluation is product based with emphasis on what is missing in the product. The pedagogy in the competence model is more learner focused, taking into account existing competences and prior experience and learning is based on enquiry through projects, a range of experiences, and sharing of experiences. Evaluation is process based, with the emphasis on the learner's progress.

As already mentioned research evidence clearly points us away from the type of grading and assessment practices associated with the performance model. In the Indian context, the NCF 2005 advocates a shift away from the performance model and towards the competence model as does the RTE act which talks of childcentered pedagogy. Such a model will necessarily involve a different set of assessment practices and a much greater autonomy for teachers and institutions. The move away from performance assessment through award of number or letter grades does not mean that teachers need to give up the process of gathering information about student's abilities and competences and of communicating that information. Rather, possibilities for more meaningful and constructive forms of assessment open up. These include narratives (written comments), portfolios (carefully chosen collections of students' writings and projects that demonstrate their interests, achievement, and improvement over time), student-led parentteacher conferences, exhibitions and other opportunities for students to show what they can do. If I remember my grandmother's telling of the Ramayana correctly, she told us that Jambavan spoke to Hanuman about his past adventures and exploits and thus was able to provide an authentic assessment of his competence in a way that built Hanuman's self-confidence. Am I using the story to conclude that we should go back to some ancient, mythical practices? I assure that I am not advocating for any such thing – the story serves as a convenient peg from which to hang some important ideas about education and assessment. Stories have a curious power to serve as productive metaphors, but that is the subject for another essay to be written some other time!

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