

Keeping Assessment, Criticism, and Learning in Perspective

by Mitchell Sakofs

Nothing dominates the landscape of schools more than assessment. You would think it would be learning. But it's not. Assessment colors every moment of every day. It permeates every corner of the school and reaches out beyond its walls and appointed time. Teachers assess students; principals assess teachers; central office personnel assess principals; and politicians and parents assess the whole lot.

The problem here is that assessment entwines fundamentally with criticism more than it does to learning or personal and professional growth. Assessment across its continuum—from community to superintendent to principal to teacher to student—is rarely equated in the mind of the receiver with constructive guidance or helpful feedback. Rather, it is experienced as an accusation of imperfection and/or indictments of ignorance or incompetence.

In an ideal world, assessment would be viewed more positively. Schools would be places where knowledgeable people share what they know with compassion and rigor; and learning, not assessment, would dominate the landscape. In such an environment, assessment would champion learning, not be wielded as an accusatory weapon.

As a new teacher, of this you can be certain: You will make mistakes and you will be assessed. With this reality in mind, you also can be certain that assessments you receive will point out areas of your knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are strong and those that need improving. As long as this style of information is coming your way, my best advice is to use it as a tool for self-improvement and professional growth, whether the origins of the assessments are external or internal. In every criticism (and compliment), there is an element of truth. So, focus neither on criticism nor compliment, but on the learning and growth that you can extract from assessment. How we perceive what we hear can be stronger than what is said. Work at viewing assessments as opportunities. With that perspective, assessment is a gift—one about which you will want to be discriminating,

reflective and open-minded, not defensive. Look to strengthen strengths and resist the temptation to resist or dismiss the critical feedback.

Consider your approach and reaction to the assessment process. How are your learning and growth facilitated through the assessment process? What works and what does not, what helps and what hurts? After answering for yourself, reflect on your methods for assessing students along the path of learning and knowledge—a path you walk as well.

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