

Good Country Practice: Put the Horse Before the Cart and Curriculum Before Assessment

January 17, 1996, in *Education Week.*

by Chris Benson
Bread Loaf Rural Teacher Network
Strom Thurmond Institute
Clemson University
Clemson, SC

How many times have you heard the patent conclusion that "assessment drives curriculum"? It's been stated so many times that many have come to accept it as the natural order of things, yet it seems to put the cart before the horse. First, we ought to think long and hard about the skills and knowledge we want for our children; then we can design assessment to measure how well they master those skills and that knowledge.

As a member of the Bread Loaf Rural Teacher Network, an organization of less than 120 rural teachers interested in school reform, I am concerned with who determines curricula for rural schools. Often superintendents look to their state departments or even the U. S. Department of Education to set curriculum standards, but those officials are not the best advocates for rural schools because they know so little about us. Rural communities have particular economies, particular demographics, particular values, and these are important factors in designing curriculum and assessment.

There is a growing trend for schools to rely on state or national agencies to set standards for rural schools, but such a dependency diminishes rural communities' ability to determine what's important for their own children. Despite this discouraging trend, or perhaps because of it, many teachers in the Bread Loaf Rural Teacher Network are looking at ways to regain control of their curricula. Because many of these teachers are incorporating project-based learning and service learning into their curricula, it makes sense to assess students' performance on such projects rather than by looking solely at national standardized test scores.

Portfolio assessment is one method that more and more teachers are using to assess and describe students' abilities. This kind of assessment follows closely behind curriculum because it lets evaluators look at documents, scripts, videos, and actual artifacts of student work that represent their performance in the classroom. Currently, there are no national standards for portfolio assessment, but teachers implementing such alternative assessment in their classrooms are poised to make a significant impact on the reform of assessment techniques, not only at their own schools, where it is most important, but also at the district, state and national level as well.

This opportunity for teachers exists now because as of July 1, 1995, no school accepting Chapter I funds (federal money originally designated for programs aimed at improving scores of students in schools that fall far below the national average) is required to adhere to the former national assessment criteria that mandated measuring, assessing, and ranking individual students on a national scale. In other words, the federal government is now only asking that schools meet state standards and that those standards be reasonable. Each state is currently in the process of setting its own standards to meet the Goals 2000 initiative. This flexibility in the way states can meet federal

requirements is especially useful to rural schools because it allows them to tailor assessment reforms to fit their unique communities. Such flexibility will help ensure that cultural traditions of rural communities can be preserved and integrated in curricula.

This flexibility in assessment will help rectify the problems that standardized testing creates. Common criticisms of standardized testing are that the tests often do not correspond to what goes on in the classroom and that the tests are poor instruments for measuring student performance across cultures. Scores on standardized tests tend to offer a reductive view of students' complex thinking skills.

One of the challenges that rural teachers face in creating their own criteria for student performance is to make a coherent picture of the national quilt of education. Though each state can add its own square to the work, the squares on the quilt must complement each other. Rural teachers from different states need to work with each other to develop a common language to describe student performance even while setting up their individual plans for assessing their own students. For example, although there is currently a great deal of portfolio assessment going on in many states, and though some states such as Vermont are considering instituting statewide portfolio assessment, there is still disagreement over what comprises a student portfolio.

Teachers who are developing assessment models ought to include students in the process, ensuring that students are aware of what they are learning and why. An assessment model should be as much a tool for students to use for self-reflection and self-improvement as it is a way for teachers to describe the performance of students. Moreover, bringing parents into the dialogue will ensure that the language of assessment derives in part from their knowledge of how their children learn. Such parent, teacher, and student interaction about performance dramatically changes the nature of PTA meetings and grade reports. In fact, more and more parents are requesting descriptive reports of their children's performance in school as a substitute for traditional report cards with their boxes and checks marks. In order to develop such tools for descriptive assessment, parents and teachers and students need to be speaking the same language.

Ideally, a good curriculum should imply effective ways to measure how well students master it. But too often reform initiatives have been thrown at teachers, who have to scramble to shape their curriculum and class activity to prepare students to do well on the assessment. Reform movements that exclude teachers in their development phase result in a curriculum that merely teaches to the test, which most teachers abhor. Bringing teachers', parents' and students' voices into the community discussion about how to measure learning will help ensure that assessment responsibly follows curriculum.

Such an idea should not be alien to America's teachers. Open discussion among these parties about standards for, and assessment of, student performance essentially enables a variety of voices to take part in the process, each voice potentially acting as a check and a balance on other voices, and such a method depends on careful analysis and use of the language used in the discussion. Nothing could be more democratic.

Editor's Note: The Bread Loaf Rural Teacher Network is a professional development network for rural teachers interested in advocating school reform and promoting greater equity of resources and deeper understanding and respect for teachers, students and parents in rural communities. The network is funded by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

Chris Benson
Literacy and Community Service Networks

Strom Thurmond Institute
Perimeter Road
Clemson University
Clemson, SC 29634-0125

email: chris@strom.clemson.edu
phone: 864-656-1665
fax: 864-656-4780