

Mountain Sun Community School's Approach & Philosophy to Assessment of Student Learning

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In recent years another term has come to be used by the leadership of our educational system, the term *intellectual capital*. This term suggests that the minds of our children are raw material for the economy. This, unfortunately, is what schools are about in the present age.

~ Ron Miller, founding publisher and editor of *Holistic Education Review*

Student evaluation . . . demands careful, thoughtful attention. Yet what typically passes for student evaluation, what fills the public discourse, is an overarching model of assessment built around a host of standardized tests, that doesn't get particularly close to student learning . . .

~ Vito Perone, Chair of Teaching Curriculum, Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1998

Ideally, education is about learners creating their own understanding, coming to terms with the world around them from inside themselves. Schools should give students the tools necessary for engaging in that work and should provide an environment that encourages and facilitates it. Holistic education as conceived at Mountain Sun Community School is designed to do exactly that. Such a thorough approach to learning creates a need for evaluating that learning in a way that is more comprehensive than the model commonly set before the public. Let's look first at that public model and a little of its origins.

The Production Game

In the early nineteenth century a famous educator wrote that schools are "factories in which raw materials are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life." So, in the midst of the mechanistic explosion, at a high point where the industrial revolution was showing how rich it could make the western world, prominent educators stated that the education of children can be represented in a model that is an analogue of the assembly line.

That model works as follows: We first design our final product (state our objectives); then we assemble the parts and decide what material and content we will need, organize workers with appropriate skills along the "line" and choose methods to organize most effectively the teaching of that content. Finally, we design a means for determining whether each product is satisfactory; we evaluate whether our objectives have been met. You may be thinking, *That sounds okay to me. We need accountability, knowing if the job has been done well.*

We do need accountability. We do need to know if the job is coming along well. But kids are not cars. Designing an assembly line for cars or cans is far from an appropriate model for engaging children in learning. For schooling, it is an old model with outmoded assumptions and a dismal track record. The method for evaluating student learning in such a model is called "objective" testing because it strives to remove the evaluation process from the people involved; this is the spirit of standardized testing, and those machine-scored test sheets are supposed to tell us if the end product has been formed, if the objectives have been met. But do they? Vito Perone, quoted above, also said that ". . . Rising test scores are no longer matters for public celebration because they are not matched by widespread demonstration of real competence." If that is so, such tests do not truly contribute to accountability, do not really demonstrate either widespread or deep learning. Then what sort of assessment fits the Mountain Sun model of education in which we treat children not as potential products of mass production but as people to be respected, little humans actively engaged their own learning journey?

A Rich Process

Interestingly, research psychologist Edward Chittenden, who worked at the Educational Testing Service in Princeton (They evaluate or score most of our standardized tests), once said, "As a process, assessment is built around multiple indicators and sources of evidence, and in this sense is distinguished from testing . . . Tests, questionnaires, interviews, ratings, unobtrusive measures, are all identified as techniques serving assessment. This definition reminds us that an assessment plan or program presumes *some breadth and variety of strategies and procedures* [emphasis added]. In such a view, tests may contribute to the program but they should not define it." It is our intention that assessment at Mountain Sun will reflect such a view. We will seek to "marry" assessment and curriculum, by which we mean that the final requirement that appropriately evaluates learning must be a profile of performance based largely on a student's succession of accomplishments. For example, a

student might give an oral report, do a painting, write a paper, dramatize a historic event, create a three-dimensional project, or more likely, use several substantive expressions of his or her learned knowledge.

Educators generally think in terms of documented assessment systems, and a holistic “system” includes documentation by observing teachers. However, a completely different dimension of assessment takes place in the individual student. To varying degrees as children grow older and become more aware of learning as learning, they are able to assess their own work, deciding what’s right and wrong, what fits and does not, what is a good enough job. If education is about learners creating their own understanding, coming to terms with the world around them from inside themselves, then this *self-appraisal is the ultimate locus of all standards*. Thus, we believe that students should be included and actively involved in the formal process of evaluating their own learning and sharing their perceptions of their progress with their teachers and parents. To facilitate this, Mountain Sun plans to develop what we call the student-led conference. Our students’ self-evaluations will be part of a quality assessment profile. Evaluating students merely to locate them on an abstract hierarchy is a prostitution of the process because assessment should be part of the students’ *learning* experience. When they look at their own learning, they are meta-learning.

A Personal Journey

Furthermore, assessment should reflect what we now know about multiple intelligence theory. It should not be limited to linguistic and analytical ways of responding. A College Board authority argued that any assessment must include a range of ways of *being good at a subject*. On-going **assessment at Mountain Sun** will provide such a range and include:

- 1) **observation (anecdotal records)**
- 2) **verbal & written responses**
- 3) **quizzes/ testing**
- 4) **student portfolios & drawings**
- 5) **individual and collaborative projects**
- 6) **various presentation formats**
- 7) **goal-setting (upper elementary grades only)**
- 8) **homework (where appropriate)**
- 9) **interim and final reports**
- 10) **and, finally, standardized testing in third and sixth grade as required by North Carolina law.**

Another dimension to this topic surrounds the issue of active learning. The production model treats kids as empty vessels to be filled or passive objects to be operated on. In contrast, Harvard’s Project Zero has published the following thoughts:

“Authentic assessment challenges students to become thoughtful judges of their own work. Theirs is the work of posing questions, making judgments, integrating criticisms, considering problems, and investigating new possibilities. . . . Students must educate themselves to become accurate evaluators of their own efforts. They must come to recognize and build on the strengths in their work and to diagnose and treat their weaknesses. No longer the passive subjects of testing and evaluation, students are key players in the process of assessment.”

A Respectful Process

It should be clear, then, that whenever learning is reduced to a series of objectives and assessment is reduced to measuring fulfillment of those objectives through some sort of standardized test, that trivializes the depth and wonder of the learning process. We wish to have a process that respects the learner and respects the quality and depth of the learning journey. Therefore, our general emphasis at Mountain Sun with regard to assessment will be threefold:

- 1) to avoid objectifying the learner
- 2) to make assessments part of the learning experience
- 3) to assess in a variety of ways so as to render up a realistic profile of what each student understands and can actually do—thus to deeply value the learner, not only the learning

We take this stance because we see learning and evaluation of learning as processes too complex to be reduced to a single measure. We take this stance also because it is not our wish to create some product for the marketplace (ref. Ron Miller above) but rather to facilitate students’ efforts to create their own understanding of themselves and the world around them. That seems to be a much more respectful approach and much more worthy of evaluating.