WHY ASSESS?

CATHERINE BÉLEC
Teacher
Cégep Gérald-Godin

Assessment is the professional pet peeve of many teachers. Some feel ill-prepared to handle it, while others balk at endorsing this role that requires them to pass judgment (and most of the time, impose a penalty), since they view themselves instead as coaches focused on helping their students succeed. *"How to assess?"*, in all its variations, is definitely the question college teachers ask most often. How to assess in a way that accurately reflects their students' competence? How to quantitatively assess a competency, attitude or any other qualitative aspect? How to assess each student fairly? How to make the assessment criteria clear? Yet a question less frequently asked or at least given only quick consideration, is *"Why assess?"* This article takes the time to examine this topic, defining what constitutes assessment and the various forms it can take, and then defining the two main goals, establishing a status and, more importantly, providing feedback to help students progress in their learning.

THE CONCEPT OF ASSESSMENT

From a semantic perspective, the concept of assessment involves measurement of quality, which in turn is anchored in an approach that is informed by a standard or utilitarian perspective that enables attaining a goal (*Le Petit Robert,* 2016). This concept therefore is intimately linked to the idea of establishing a status: a judgment is made on the quality of work or performance done at a given time. Assessment therefore involves the constraint of a fixed period of time associated with the specific moment when a measurement is taken. Thus, although it is not impossible to envision *measuring* the quality of something that would develop over time, the concept of progress over time is certainly not the first idea that comes to mind when we think of the act of *assessing*.

When we move away from the common definitions and zero in on what it means to assess learning, the concept of assessment becomes more complex. This is mainly due to the fact that education pursues two goals that, while complementary, are quite distinct. First, it forms part of ongoing learning, in the form of personal growth and development. Second, educational institutions fill a social role by legitimizing both the competencies

and knowledge a learner has acquired. This legitimacy is confirmed by obtaining grades or a diploma, which establish that at a clearly defined moment, a student attained a certain level of competency or knowledge. This contemplation of assessment leads to the discovery that a tension exists between the perspective of a student's growth (continuous over time) and that of establishing their legitimacy (fixed in time).

TYPES OF ASSESSMENT

Perhaps as a result of this tension, the learning assessment process has led to the development of various types of assessments, based on needs and context: diagnostic, formative, summative and for certification. In Table 1, a brief definition is given for each type.

Although they differ, these assessment types may overlap or even merge in practice. For example, a summative assessment may serve a formative goal, or lead to certification if conducted at the end of a learning sequence, especially if the scale of its weighting determines whether the student passes or fails the course.

In turn, students usually make no distinction between these assessment types. Moreover, most have never really had occasion to think actively about the subject, as assessments are a reality they are "subjected to," starting in primary school. Like many social practices people encounter from childhood, most students appear to accept the principle of assessment without challenge. Of course, they are interested in the benchmarks, the ever-popular *"What's on the test?"* and *"How are you marking us?"* They maintain an instinctive and pragmatic, rather than rational, understanding. In fact, the way they distinguish the different assessment types very often comes down to two fairly dichotomous factors that may overlap: first, assessments that count and those that do not; and second, assessments with a "constructive" focus (preparation for other assessments) and "final" exams (end of session, module, etc.).

In brief, we find that to support students in their learning and to make a judgment on the attainment of goals, teachers use several assessment types, each with different objectives, but which can sometimes be combined in practice. However, students' perception of these assessments is more clear-cut and binary. They incorporate fewer nuances in their view, but still retain a measure of clarity.
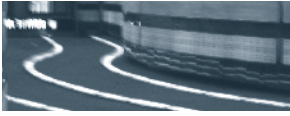
TABLE 1	DESCRIPTION OF ASSESSMENT TYPES[1]

DIAGNOSTIC ⟶ Point in the learning process when it occurs: At the start of the course or a learning sequence	
Goals	• Determine whether the student possesses the prerequisite resources for learning, to adjust the teaching plan and educational activities accordingly • Situate the student with respect to future learning
Persons able to act as assessors	• The teacher, the student and the peers
Results of these assessment types	• Criteria to guide the teacher and the assessed student, for subsequent learning

FORMATIVE ⟶ Point in the learning process when it occurs: Continuous throughout the learning process	

Goals	• Regulate learning
	  – Diagnose the nature and origin of shortcomings
	  – Implement strategies to help the student repeat successes and remedy shortcomings
	  – Help the student self-regulate and grow for their own motives

Persons able to act as assessors	• The teacher, the student and the peers
Results of these assessment types	• Feedback to guide learning and ensure the student's progress

SUMMATIVE* ⟶ Point in the learning process when it occurs: At the end of a sequence or *ad hoc*	
Goals	• Regulate learning, where this type of assessment occurs during the term • Determine the quality of a performance at a specific time by attributing a mark based on a set of criteria
Persons able to act as assessors	• Only the teacher
Results of these assessment types	• Mark • Feedback to explain the results to the student

CERTIFICATION* ⟶ Point in the learning process when it occurs: At the end of a course or program	
Goals	• Establish attainment of a certain competency, through a grade based on a threshold • Inform the administration of the competency attained by a student
Persons able to act as assessors	• Only the teacher
Results of these assessment types	• Grade

*   Since the concept of certification assessment is fairly recent, it should be noted that some authors do not make a clear distinction in their articles between summative and certification assessments.

[1]   This table is a summary of the definitions suggested by Aylwin (1995), Leroux (2010), and Scallon (2000).

▶ THE GOALS OF LEARNING ASSESSMENT

With these distinctions now established, we can focus on the famous question "Why do we assess?" The distinction has already been made earlier in this article between two possible answers: one centred on an educational, constructive and ongoing goal; the other based on a social, administrative and fixed-time goal. The first sets its sights on the future and is anchored in a pedagogical vision, while the second is based on the need for a subject specialist to make a judgment on a student's competency at a specific time, so that others can gauge the student's qualifications.

> *A tension exists between the perspective of a student's growth (continuous over time) and that of establishing their legitimacy (fixed in time).*

If teachers are asked what the act of assessing entails, most will probably reply by rote, "assigning a mark," which brings us back to the semantic definition of assessment, stipulating that it is designed to assign a value to a performance. However, those teachers who take more time to think about the objectives of assessment will realize that this entails much more than simply assigning a mark, since the overarching purpose is to guide students in their learning. To believe the opposite is to relegate the teacher to the role of assessor. For students to progress in their learning, they need feedback about the work they do, and this feedback generally comes during assessments, whether formative or summative. Thus, assessment only has meaning from an educational standpoint if the teacher's judgment is focused on giving students feedback that is intended to help them develop their capacity for self-assessment. This is because it is only when students deploy a critical eye on their own learning and achievements that they can begin to independently make the necessary adjustments and thereby improve.

▶ THE MESSAGE SENT BY AN ASSESSMENT MARK

We should consider a few particularities of feedback, notably in the form a mark is presented. In qualitative terms, the best feedback specifically indicates the nature of an error or shortcoming and suggests strategies that the student can use to address the problem going forward (Roberge, 2008). The very reason for feedback, in educational terms, is prospective: it helps students judge their work or assignment so they can self-regulate in the future. From a pedagogical perspective, a quantitative mark is at the same terribly inadequate, yet crucial. Inadequate in that it is often very general (rather than targeted) and makes no suggestion to the student on how to improve. Crucial because unlike the qualitative comments written on a test, it defines the level of a specific teacher's expectations. For example, while a comment such as "Very good!" from one teacher may translate into a mark of 95 percent, it may only earn 80 percent from another. The first suggests that very little further progress is needed, while the second indicates some room for potential improvement.

This point on equivalence between qualitative and quantitative highlights another aspect of the shortcomings of a mark, since it does not factor in a few implicit statements that vary between cultures and teachers. In some societies (such as Europe), a mark of 75 percent is considered excellent, while in Quebec this would be seen as average. Similarly, a teacher might consider that no work is perfect and thus never give a mark higher than 90 percent. These tacit rules, especially those of teachers, are particularly problematic since students do not know them, and because a mark, unlike other types of feedback, is not intended solely for students, but also for others. Take for instance final course marks, which will be seen by various people (employers, admissions officials at other educational institutions, etc.).

Thus, feedback in the form of a mark is a message not intended solely for the student; consequently, it serves no educational purpose. The mark becomes both a fixed status and a message intended both for the student and others. The perception of this message from the teacher, issued as a mark, will vary greatly depending on the meaning assigned to it by the person analysing the mark (Svinicki and McKeachie, 2013). When we consider the difficulties teachers sometimes have finding a reliable way to measure the competence of students and add the fact that some do not bell-curve their marks while others do—which the mark obviously does not indicate—we can question the ultimate meaning of this "tossed out" mark on the student's experience. This poses a genuine problem, as while teachers find that the mark they give often sends a message that, according to their standards, is clear, the mark will not necessarily be interpreted in line with these standards by employers and universities. Students, however, are keenly aware of this. Despite this, the reality is that teachers are required to assign a mark by the Institutional Policy on the Evaluation of Student Achievement (*IPESA*) of their respective colleges. Thus, teachers have no choice but to fall back on what they can control: their criteria, which they strive to make as clear as possible, in conjunction with a willingness to be fair toward all students in their class.

This is why marks do not fit into the same communication channel for teachers as for students: the former view them as a way to communicate with students about the state of their learning in reference to a set of implicit criteria (or explicit in the classroom context). The latter receive this as a message from the teacher that is intended not only for them, but also to other people who are not informed of the implicit criteria that inform the mark.

It thus comes as no surprise that assessment is a flashpoint between teachers and students. Teachers view it as an obligation that, if structured in a pedagogically-sound fashion, will give students a better sense of their learning. Students, however, instead take a pragmatic approach that is linked to the establishment of an immutable grade that may benefit or harm them, depending on how it is interpreted by other people who see it in future.

▶ COMBINED OBJECTIVES: A GOOD APPROACH?

Given this context, students tend to self-regulate more based on their quantitative marks. They often pose the question 'How can I gain a few extra marks?' Faced with this accounting-based question, teachers are dismayed to find that students are not sufficiently focused on authentic learning. In opposition to this perspective focused on marks, the concepts of self-assessment and peer assessment carry little weight if these formative types of assessment are not explicitly structured in a way that links them to summative assessments. Formative assessment, in fact, runs the risk of only superficially interesting serious students–in the sense that they provide a better indication of what the teacher wants–or not interesting those students who are solely focused on their results and obtaining a passing grade for the course.

Faced with this problem, many teachers have the reflex to alter their formative assessments by converting them into small summative assessments, as a way to motivate students:

> "Teachers generally have a love-hate relationship with summative assessment; they like to use it as a 'means of motivation,' that is, they want the option, if necessary, of brandishing the threat of marks to 'make students work,' but they bitterly despise the fact that students 'no longer work for anything except marks.'" (Aylwin, 1995)

These statements made by Aylwin more than 20 years ago point out a reality still very present in colleges today. Yet this set of competing motives has serious consequences, especially that of favouring the pragmatic perspective of students over the pedagogical perspective of teachers.

In fact, attributing marks to a formative assessment confronts the binary perception held by students, who perceive formative assessments as those that "do not count" and summative assessments as those that "do count." Note that this simple choice of words already presents an absurd reality in an educational context, implicitly suggesting that formative assessment has less value than summative assessment. This being said, this is in fact what actually happens: to the extent that summative assessments serve two purposes, to measure a performance at a specific time (social role) while leading the learner to build and improve their mastery of competencies over time, formative assessment becomes the equivalent of the many summative assessments administered to students, but without the associated marks.

By partaking in this game of generating extrinsic motivation linked to marks, rather than intrinsic motivation linked to the task and learning, the teacher implicitly confirms to students the preponderance of one of the roles of assessment, establishing a status, at the expense of its other role, regulating learning. It might be argued that this is not such a big problem: if awarding a few points motivates students to complete their assignments and leads them to effectively engage in learning, why bother with solely formative assessment? It is fascinating to see the effort some students make to gain just an additional one or two percent. However, this practice fragments the mark (which is rarely perfect) and multiplies the fixed results that ultimately force the student to realize that they can no longer improve enough to achieve the learning outcomes. Placing students in a situation where they cannot "catch up" is one of the most effective ways to slow down development of their self-regulation (Buysse and Sannier-Bérusseau, 2015). The importance students place on these much-touted marks then should come as no surprise, since many teachers knowingly or unknowingly encourage this perspective by downplaying formative assessment in favour of summative assessment.

▶ SO HOW DO WE RECONCILE THE TWO PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT?

Now that these problems have been identified, how do we evaluate student competency, assessed at a specific time, while remaining rooted in a pedagogical perspective? Categorically dismissing the entirety of the current system is obviously undesirable. Despite its shortcomings, it still has its purpose. In brief, while it would be unwise to reject the system, it does seem important not to resign ourselves to the status quo.

It would be useful for all players in the college system to think about the goals of learning and develop various ways to assess

learning, in a consistent manner. Teachers are well-placed to start a thorough collective deliberation on assessment. Before asking "How do we assess?", we must first seek to understand "Why do we assess?" because the answer to the latter question will help teachers achieve consistency in the way they answer the former. Student thinking should also focus on the second question. Although students are the people directly affected by assessment, they are too often excluded from this exercise. It is important to jettison the excessively passive attitude that accompanies traditional practices, one which encourages teachers to simply replicate the assessment models they themselves faced as students, those that subject students to assessments rather than seeking their involvement in them.

Thus, given the paradoxes the system imposes, teachers must roll up their sleeves and look beyond the traditional forms of assessment: they can explore and experiment. We already have many assessment strategies that promote a progressive perspective intent on improving student learning, such as portfolios[2] (see the sidebar on next page).

In addition to informing themselves, to discuss and take risks, teachers also have the responsibility of taking the time to assess their own assessment strategies in light of their perception of learning. It is quite understandable for educators advocating a humanist and liberating education of the person to despair before the utilitarian perspective perceived at times in modern society, including within some members of the student body. However, if these teachers settle for assessing learning by means that do not allow learners to focus on improving their competencies and agrees to establish these skills at a specific time in relation to other students rather than take a view of the individual's progression, without exploring and genuinely thinking about the potential options, they will fail to remain coherent or even honest toward their students and themselves.

> *By partaking in this game of generating extrinsic motivation linked to marks, rather than intrinsic motivation linked to the task and learning, the teacher implicitly confirms to students the preponderance of one of the roles of assessment, establishing a status, at the expense of its other role, regulating learning.*

Moreover, if teachers truly want students to acquire the ability to self-regulate and self-assess in a critical fashion, there is an apparent need to set an example. Teachers therefore should focus on also assessing their personal posture as a teacher, as well as the relevance and effectiveness of their teaching and assessment strategies. ◗

REFERENCES

AYLWIN, U. 1995. Apologie de l'évaluation formative. *Pédagogie collégiale, 8*(3): 24-32. Retrieved from [aqpc.qc.ca/revue/article/apologie-evaluation-formative].

BUYSSE, A. and C. SANNIER-BÉRUSSEAU. 2015. Développer l'apprentissage autorégulé : état des lieux et perspectives. In *Entre autorégulation, motivation et persévérance : l'autonomie*. 83e Congrès de Acfas. Rimouski: Acfas.

CÔTÉ, F. 2012. Les compétences communes au collégial, de la théorie à la pratique. *Pédagogie collégiale, 25*(2): 18-23. Retrieved from [aqpc.qc.ca/revue/article/competences-communes-au-collegial-theorie-pratique].

LE PETIT ROBERT. 2016. "Évaluer" et "Valeur". Paris: Le Robert.

LEROUX, J. L. (Ed.). 2015. *Évaluer les compétences au collégial et à l'université : un guide pratique*. Montreal: Association québécoise de pédagogie collégiale, PERFORMA Collection.

LEROUX, J. L. 2010. *L'évaluation des compétences au collégial : un regard sur des pratiques évaluatives*. PAREA Research Report. Saint-Hyacinthe: Cégep de Saint-Hyacinthe. Retrieved from [cdc.qc.ca/parea/787400-leroux-evaluation-competences-st-hyacinthe-PAREA-2010.pdf].

MEEUS, W., L. VAN LOOY, and P. VAN PETEGEM. 2006. Portfolio in higher education: Time for a clarification framework. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 17*(2): 127-135.

ROBERGE, J. 2008. *Rendre plus efficace la correction des rédactions*. PAREA Research Report. Montreal: Cégep André-Laurendeau. Retrieved from [cdc.qc.ca/parea/786948_roberge_correction_andre_laurendeau_PAREA_2008.pdf].

SCALLON, G. 2000. *L'évaluation formative*. Montreal: Éditions du Renouveau Pédagogique inc.

SVINICKI, M. and W. J. McKEACHIE. 2013. *McKeachie's Teaching Tips* (14th Ed.). Belmont: Wadsworth.

Catherine BÉLEC has been a French teacher at Cégep Gérald-Godin for more than 10 years. In the fall of 2014, she conducted exploratory research on testing a new prototype for feedback: multitype feedback (using ICT to combine written or audio comments, hypertext links, etc.). She then registered in the professional doctorate program at Université de Sherbrooke. Catherine is now conducting research funded by PAREA on learning by reading in various disciplines, self-regulated learning and active learning in college. She has published several articles on reading strategies in the journals *Correspondance* and *Pédagogie collégiale*.

c.belec@cgodin.qc.ca

[2]   For more information on the portfolios, read the three interesting articles or papers by Côté (2012), Leroux (2015), and Meeus, Van Looy and Van Petegem (2006).

The first type of portfolio is centred on progressive learning, consisting of compiling several achievements by a student over the course of a term. By focusing on improvements in competency, this portfolio must be supported by both specific performance criteria and regular formative feedback. In several respects, it combines the benefits of formative and summative assessments: the student receives feedback (in the form of comments and marks) over the course of several assignments. However, these marks are solely intended to function as a reference point to help the student gauge the quality of their work so that they can improve their subsequent performance. Only at the end of the term will a final, comprehensive grade be established, which can then be based on many criteria and the entire body of work. The quality of the entire production can obviously be taken into account, but this must be augmented to a varying degree by assessment of the progress achieved between each of these assignments. This type of portfolio, which can also be supplemented by a reflective report of the learning[3] achieved by the student, has the benefit of avoiding a fragmentation of the mark while leaving time for students to develop their ability to assess their own achievements in light of their teacher's expectations and the competencies to be mastered. The fact that the mark is evolving (even if to a limited extent) stimulates both student motivation and self-regulation. Ultimately, this naturally tends toward learning that is centred less on marks and more on the competencies to be developed. This type of portfolio also increases the relevance of other forms of assessment, especially peer assessment, which can prove valuable for lightening a teacher's workload somewhat while providing them with a critical perspective on their own assessment criteria (between teacher and students, the teacher is not always the most demanding). This type of assessment, in accordance with the criteria chosen by the teacher, in no way penalizes gifted students in comparison with traditional assessments, but does give the weakest students more encouragement to improve. When a teacher views assessment not as measuring one student's competence against those of their classmates, but rather as leading each to develop their own competencies, this type of assessment resolves many problems. This type of portfolio does, however, entail a different judgment than traditional assessments, as it absolutely must factor in progress in learning and not be based solely on achievement.

The second form of portfolio is closer to that used in the arts and consists of a person's best work, those that provide the best means for appraising their competence. This type of portfolio differs from the previous one in several ways. While the former includes all an individual's production to show progress and requires consideration of the progress in a student's learning, the second involves a selection chosen by the student (thus stimulating their ability for self-assessment) and focuses solely on their achievements. Like the first type, however, this portfolio reduces the fragmentation of the mark and converts all assignments into formative assessments, giving students the possibility to improve up to the end of the course. However, it may have the drawback of cultivating wishful thinking in some students, who wait until the end of the term to start doing their assignments. The teacher does have the option of supervising production of this portfolio to reduce this risk. For instance, they can require various types of production (writing, course notes, project summary, laboratory/activity report, exam, etc.) to be submitted at various times over the term (for example, one assignment for weeks 1 to 3, another for weeks 4 to 6, etc.). Once again, this requires that the teacher allows students to produce a certain number (and type) of assignments and provide them with assessments of these, in the form of both feedback and a mark.

---

[3] A learning report leads students, in a directed and explicit way, to reflect on their performance. From an educational perspective, this is an ideal complement to a teacher's assessment, serving as a vehicle for transferring the professor's assessment to development of self-assessment by the student. It may take the form of answers to a questionnaire, reflections, etc. This corresponds to the concept of the 3P statements explained in the article "L'évaluation des apprentissages au collégial – Un réseau de concepts pour guider les pratiques évaluatives," by France Côté, in this issue.