

21st Century Assessments: Adapting Assessments for 21st Century Skills

Introduction

Preparing our students for the 21st century is a multi-step process. A modern educator must be prepared to adapt her way of thinking about teaching, her perception of the students and how they learn, her curricula, and her assessments in order to successfully integrate 21st century learning principles into her classroom. There is a widening deficit between what today's learners know and what they need to know to be successful in today's global economy. Subject-level mastery is no longer adequate for today's workforce. Students must be skilled problem-solvers, critical thinkers, communicators, and creators in order to meet the needs of both present-day and future jobs (Skills, 2006). According to the North American Council for Online Learning (Skills, 2006), eighty-four percent of employers report that students are not well prepared for the workplace. Further, the council reports that up to 20% of the United States' students cannot perform basic mathematical computations. But what does this have to do with assessment?

Assessing 21st Century Skills

Although educators have been assessing their students for centuries, the problem lies in that educators are being asked to assess learners for skills that are not easily assessable, nor are the assessments themselves easily created, and sometimes the assessments do not assess what we should be assessing! Even the purpose for assessing has shifted somewhat from traditional assessment. Traditionally, assessments were the summative output of student

progress. Students were assessed after learning took place and were usually not re-assessed over the same content. Traditional assessments fail to meet 21st century requirements in some crucial ways. For example, current assessments do not measure whether or not students can apply their knowledge to new situations, they do not evaluate problem-solving or communication skills, they do not help teachers make decisions about daily instructional practice, and they almost never measure a student's progress from the beginning of the year to the end (Skills P. f., 2010). Today, there is a new strive for a range of continuous and formative assessments that gauge student progress over a period of time and which can be used to identify gaps in content knowledge, to assess multiple types of learners, to inform and enhance instructional practices, for self-reflection and development, and to provide data for future assessments (Hill, 2008).

The Future of Assessments

There is much evidence that the future of assessments lies in technology. Learners crave the immediate feedback that goes hand-in-hand with digital delivery. Tomorrow's assessments will be multi-faceted in that they can assess multiple skill sets at once. Educators need more than a standardized test to accurately diagnose learning. Digital assessments will be capable of engaging today's technology-driven learners while assessing 21st century skills such as global awareness, systems thinking, ethics, visual and information literacies, and communication skills. Electronic assessments can also aggregate data and show student improvement over a period of time (Hill, 2008).

Many states are finding that belonging to a consortium can make assessing easier to handle. The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) is a consortium made up of 31 states that share a common goal. The SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium's (SBAC) vision is to create an assessment system—

“one that includes a set of balanced components that can be adapted to meet students' needs across participating States—is rooted in a concern for the valid, reliable, and fair assessment of the deep disciplinary understanding and higher-order thinking skills that are increasingly demanded by a knowledge-based global economy. This vision also is based on the belief that assessment must support ongoing improvements in instruction and promote meaningful learning experiences for students that lead to outcomes valued by all stakeholders” (State).

Consortia like this one and the Partnership for Assessment Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) reaffirm the need for an updated view of assessment in our country. States that belong are able to share resources and ideas as well as design a consistent system for assessment that may eventually be used nation-wide. Most importantly, the consortium recognizes that assessments must be multi-dimensional and assess more than just core subjects. The assessments that these consortia will design will not just be traditional standardized “fill-in-the-bubble” tests, but promise to assess critical thinking and complex reasoning as well. The hope is that states which use these tests will use them formatively rather than summatively; that the tests will provide realistic, complex performance tasks; immediate feedback; incorporate accommodations for a wide range of students; and, for the first time, measure higher order thinking (Duncan, 2010).

One of the biggest shifts that may occur is in how assessments are used and why they are considered valid. Currently, assessments are used quite often for accountability. “Teaching-to-the-test” is a wide-spread phenomenon that must be curbed. Our traditional assessments focus on easily measured skills and leave enormous gaps between what students are actually capable of and what they are measured as being capable of. This phenomenon has grown out of a rather strongly encouraged, (whether directly or not), focus on teaching to the standards. Unfortunately, many of the states’ standards do not meet the terms for which students must be prepared. Many states are guilty of “dumbing down” their state standards in order to better be able to meet them (Duncan, 2010). Until state standards are revised, many educators and administrators will continue to teach specifically to meet those standards. This is another area that can be positively affected by state assessment consortia. If the states can all agree on Common Core standards and unify standards on a national level, as well as adopt next generation assessments, we will see a shift in testing at a nation-wide level which will affect our nation’s standing at the global level.

What can teachers do?

Teachers can take steps in their own classrooms, although, it will take a national campaign to shift things most effectively. Teachers can try to embed 21st century skills into their standards wherever appropriate; create rubrics that define and differentiate learning expectations; align learning resources to 21st century skills, use technology in meaningful ways and for multiple purposes; and continuously reflect and revise their curricula. Teachers should also upgrade existing assessments and make sure that they align with 21st century thinking and

skills. One last step that teachers may take is to implement a grading or reporting system that evaluates 21st century skills and provides specific and rapid feedback to students (Pearlman, 2010).

Conclusion

We are at a crossroads as educators. The nation's educational system has one foot in the past and one foot in future. Do we continue to do things as we always have because that is the way we have always done it? Or do we continue to push for a more future-friendly version of education? In order to prepare students for their futures and for the future of our nation as a global partner, educators should reassess the way they assess! Educators have a responsibility to see that their students are well prepared for life after they have graduated. This means embedding 21st century skills into the curriculum, using multiple and frequent assessments, providing prompt feedback, and embracing educational change. We are in the midst of a revolution and must not be left behind!

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