

# **CRITICAL ASSESSMENT: A STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT**

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*The proposed session sought to engage participants in a discussion about building assessment practices with students, as opposed to for students. Critical pedagogy may provide one way to redefine this previously uni-directional practice (Keesing-Styles, 2003). This approach concentrates student experience at the center of assessment, causing a power shift in status quo assessment dynamics. Engaging students can reveal that assessments do not indicate the conclusion of learning, in turn helping students perceive learning as a lifelong process. The following proceedings present major ideas and questions which resulted from the discussion, including theoretical uncertainty and barriers towards implementation. Suggestions for future research and practice are also proposed.*

Assessment is increasingly becoming an influential force in education (Fischman & Topper, 2017). Its effects are as far-reaching as government policy, yet as close to the classroom as testing anxiety. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are entitled “the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child...[those views] given [their] due weight” (General Assembly Resolution, 1996, p.4). Yet, assessments that affect decisions made about a student, often take place without student counsel. Elwood & Lundy (2010) remarked on the possibility of this phenomena being a violation of children’s rights, as students have virtually no participation or say in the creation of such assessments, and/or decisions made as a result of them.

So how do we work to enhance the assessment partnership with students, without compromising the validity and reliability of such assessments? Critical pedagogy may provide one lens through which we can transform our current conceptions of assessment. Partnering with students may cause a power shift that more accurately accounts for “due weight” of student input. Further, it may empower students, and become a source of motivation toward learning goals.

## **CRITICAL ASSESSMENT: CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AS A MODEL FOR POSSIBILITIES**

In January 2018, Mark Barnes published a commentary piece in *Education Week*, entitled “No, Students Don’t Need Grades.” This seemingly extreme title and ensuing article was met with much defense regarding the way we currently asses our students (Will, 2018). In the article, Barnes suggested the possibility of a “brave new world” of gradeless classrooms, in order to foster students with mastery and learning goals (para. 1). He suggests that the first step is being accountable to students and helping them understand why unconventional assessment methods may be beneficial to their learning. Bringing students into the conversation, he says, is

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integral to moving towards this “brave new world.” With students on board, he suggests teaming up with parents and school/community leaders to garner more support which may lead to eventual institutional and policy support. Barnes’ provocative proposition, while radical to some, provides new ways of thinking about our traditional assessment practices in education.

So how do we begin deconstructing practices which students and practitioners often engage in without much novel thought? Critical pedagogy is one avenue for reexamining our current practices. Critical pedagogy derives from theorist, Paulo Freire’s work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Critical pedagogy is that which is “concerned with the influences of educational knowledge, and of cultural formations generally, that perpetuates or legitimates an unjust status quo; fostering a critical capacity in citizens is a way of enabling them to resist such power effects” (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 55). Critical pedagogy focuses on bringing marginalized voices to the fore, in order to question normative practices and transform them. In the realm of assessment, students’ voices are often the ones that are marginalized as assessments, as well as the decisions made about their outcomes, are typically made without student input.

Lewis, Flint, & Sluys (2002) presented four dimensions of Critical Pedagogy (as used in Critical Literacy) that can be translated to our dialogue within assessment: 1) disrupting the commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, 3) focusing on social political issues, and 4) taking action and promoting justice. One example of Critical Pedagogy in action, includes asking students to describe a problem in their community (A.M., 2013). Alongside student input, teachers shape a unit around the problem, acknowledging students’ diverse background and experiences. While Critical Pedagogy and its respective dimensions, are typically applied to curriculum and learning objectives, they can be adapted to rethink status quo assessment practices. Critical Assessment, a term/theory that is not explicitly defined in existing literature, may be a new way of conceptualizing assessment using Critical Pedagogy as a model.

## DISCUSSION

The discussion on possibilities for Critical Assessment was prefaced with the preceding review of Critical Pedagogy and its accompanying dimensions (see Appendix). Four open-ended questions were used to stimulate conversation on Critical Assessment:

- 1) How can we use the four dimensions of Critical Pedagogy and apply them to the realm of assessment?
- 2) Have you personally used/witnessed the use of an assessment strategy that may be considered an example of Critical Assessment?
- 3) What are some ways students can be included in the discourse around assessment?
- 4) How can assessment be developed in a critical way, without compromising the validity of its uses?

The discussion began with a spirited contest of the possibility that the Four Dimensions of Critical Pedagogy may be too narrow when translated to assessment. More specifically, the dimension of “focusing on social political issues,” was challenged, and it was proposed that our focus should include other facets such as community, and the Arts, for example.

The biggest question, as anticipated for practitioners, was what Critical Assessment might look like in practice. While opinion was divided, one practitioner, Barbara<sup>1</sup>, mentioned a current practice that might fall into this category of student-partnered assessment. This example

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used to refer to participants in order to protect their identities.

involved student input toward classroom participation grades. Students began the course by defining characteristics of good, active participation as well as poor participation. This rubric was then used by students to evaluate themselves throughout the course, ultimately resulting in a score out of ten. To my surprise, as well as other dialogue participants', the practitioner reported that students did not simply assign themselves a ten out of ten. In fact, one student, marked themselves as a three, despite the instructor's view of that student having excellent participation. The average score, she revealed, was eight-and-a-half to nine, which the instructor agreed is what she would have given most of the students. She did admit, though, to having the occasional student who would rate themselves as 9.99, with the instructor disagreeing with such an evaluation. By using criteria that students themselves had established, the participant mentioned how involved students were, to the extent that students began to "police" themselves, noting instances where their peers were engaging in what they defined as poor participation.

This excerpt provides an interesting example of how Critical Assessment may manifest in practice. One issue Barbara inadvertently raised, is that of validity of assessment purpose and reliability, when students are actively involved in creating and evaluating their performance. In this instance, the practitioner notes a discord between some students' evaluation of themselves, and the instructor's own informal evaluations of the student. This begs the question, what happens when there is discord between an instructor and student opinion regarding performance?

My suggestion to alleviating this issue, specifically the reliability piece, is to use multiple sources to arrive at such a conclusion. A participant added the possibility of including peer evaluation (as it seems students were already in the process of "policing" each other), in order to arrive at a more accurate evaluation. Overall, by using student voice to develop criteria for assessment, in addition to trusting students to assess themselves according to those criteria, I would argue this practitioner is engaging in a form of Critical Assessment. A few of the participants, including myself, noted wanting to adopt such a practice in our own classrooms in the future.

Another participant, Mark, asked a question along the lines of, "As a long-time practitioner, how do I retrain myself to think about how I assess my students?" I repeated a line from an assessment session led by conference chair, Natasha Kenny, earlier that day stating: "Assessment is typically the last thing we [practitioners] think about, but the first thing our students think about." Critical Assessment, I argued, could allow us to think about it first, too, by bringing student voices to the figurative table of assessment. This speaks to the dimension of Critical Pedagogy that requires "disrupting the commonplace," and exploring opportunities that may seem uncomfortable at first. This led to a discussion about power, and how Critical Assessment would require a relinquishing of power in order to share power with students (Torrance & Pryor, 1998). Specifically, how do you deal with the hesitation to give up power, and how much power do you distribute? These questions, while not definitively answered, began the process of deconstructing normative conceptions of power in regards to assessment. Fobes & Kaufman (2008) asked similar questions in regards to Critical Pedagogy: "How do we invite students to be co-teachers [in this case, co-assessors] if we...begin from a position of intellectual authority? (p.28)" The first step to creating power with students then, is reducing our personal notions of "intellectual authority," and trusting (as Barbara did in her example), students to have a genuine say in what we do.

In discussing the challenges for Critical Assessment, Hannah, mentioned that purposeful assessment practices would require time. This time, she suggested, might have the ability to detract from time necessary to spend on subject matter. As with any prospective change in the

classroom, time must be dedicated to reevaluating and reshaping current practices. This investment may be more difficult for some populations, such as new or minority faculty who in this instance, would have to balance “de-centering authority” when they themselves, “are working to gain authority” in both their classrooms and departments (Fobes & Kaufman, 2008).

An additional challenge Mark mentioned, was the issue of institutional bureaucracy, mentioning how syllabi (including the way students will be assessed), typically has to be approved by a department in advance of a classroom meeting, thus, before instructors have even had an opportunity to interact with their students. It is possible that in this review, instructors could provide space for student voice by advocating for a piece of overall assessment that is to be decided with students, much like in Barbara’s example.

The discussion concluded with a question from Hannah in regards to the possible effects of Critical Assessment on learning. Hannah pondered whether engaging students in assessment would increase interest in the subject matter itself. As Critical Assessment is not explicit in the literature, nor its possible uses, there is little data on the effects of engaging students in the assessment process. I hypothesized that engaging students in assessment would in fact increase interest in the subject matter, as including students in dialogue of their assessment might ease anxiety related to assessment, as well as increase feelings of agency and motivation, which has been shown to lead to increases in learning goals (Black & Deci, 2000).

Following the discussion, Brandon asked me individually whether there have been instances of students defining “A” quality work, and/or defining boundaries for each grade. While I have not come across examples of students determining whole-class grades, there are ample studies documenting student input in rubric design (Andrade & Du, 2005; Boud & Soler, 2015).

The current discussion of Critical Assessment highlights the beginning of dialogue around integrating student voice into our current assessment practices in order to empower and engage. Current practitioners cite value for practice, as well as barriers for implementation.

## **ANALYSIS & SUGGESTIONS**

The conference discussion on Critical Assessment, resulted in more questions than answers. What do we define as Critical Assessment? How does this look in practice? How do practitioners and students rethink the way they have previously experienced assessment? How do power dynamics manifest in practice? How do practitioners overcome barriers such as institutional demands, time constraints, and positionality? These questions indicate the infancy of Critical Assessment, as well as the promise for its practice.

I argue that the first step in moving this field forward, is conceptualizing a definition of Critical Assessment, that draws on and adds upon the work of Critical Pedagogy and the like. Dialogue, work which started at this conference, is also an important facet in putting this into practice. Venturing into a new way of thinking about assessment, will certainly require some convincing and negotiation. Suggestions for research in this field include how Critical Assessment can be put into practice, and what effects these practices have on all stakeholders within education, but most importantly, students.

While we are more than a simple leap away from a “brave new world of gradeless classrooms,” we are approaching an important fork in the road with our assessment practices: while the road less traveled—involving students in our assessment practice—is still rough and rife with obstacles, its capacity for change should not be underestimated.

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APPENDIX A

## Critical Assessment: A student-centered approach to assessment

2018 University of Calgary Conference on Postsecondary Learning and Teaching

“No, Students Don’t Need Grades”: Mark Barnes, Education Week

- ◆ Brave new world of gradeless classrooms
  - > Be accountable to students first
  - > Get parents on board, explain why you are doing this
  - > Team up with school and community leaders

Critical Pedagogy – Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

“concerned with the influences of educational knowledge, and of cultural formations generally, that perpetuate or legitimate an unjust status quo; fostering a critical capacity in citizens is a way of enabling them to resist such power effects.” (Burbules & Berk, 1999)

“How do we invite students to be co-teachers if we ... begin from a position of intellectual authority? How can we let students have a say about what they learn when there is a discipline-specific body of knowledge we are expected to cover in the course? How do we de-center authority when we are working to gain authority?” (Fobes & Kaufman, 2008, p. 28)



### 4 Dimensions of Critical Pedagogy<sup>1</sup>

- > Disrupting the commonplace
- > Interrogating multiple viewpoints
- > Focusing on social political issues
- > Taking action and promoting justice

<sup>1</sup>Lewis, Flint, & Sluys, 2002

### Possibilities for Critical Assessment

- ◆ *How can we use the four dimensions of critical pedagogy and apply them to the realm of assessment?*
- ◆ *Have you personally used/witnessed the use of an assessment strategy that may be considered an example of Critical Assessment?*
- ◆ *What are some ways students can be included in the discourse around assessment?*
- ◆ *How can assessment be developed in a critical way, without compromising the validity of its uses?*

“Change the environment, not the child” -Peter DeWitt