

*Fear the man who feels himself a slave. He'll want to make a slave of you. – John Holt*

We are always assessing, whether you are trying to decide what to wear in the morning, or deciding to drive through a yellow light on your way home from work; we assess whenever we are at a juncture and trying to make a decision about how to proceed. In education, we assess in order to determine how best to proceed with our students: Do we push them little further? Do we need to go back? This definition of assessment is fairly obvious I think, but there are two main problems that emerge if we press a little: (1) there are many factors that make it difficult, if not impossible, to accurately measure what a student knows and is capable of, and, (2) it is difficult to decide what to assess. The first issue is, roughly, one of methods and practices, the second is one of ethics and politics. I state that the first issue is “roughly” one of methods and practices because the hidden curriculum makes political and ethical any decision about what methods and practices to employ.

Because of the first difficulty that I mention, I approach assessment with humility. My students have as many opportunities as they like, in any form that they can think of, to demonstrate mastery of a subject for grading purposes. In other words, I try as much as possible to place in the hands of my students the responsibility for demonstrating their knowledge and understanding. Humility in assessment also demands that I doubt the ability of formal assessments (i.e. tests and quizzes) to provide me with the information required to make accurate judgments of students. As such, I am willing to give equal weight to informal assessment practices (i.e. conversations, question, comments, pictures, journals...) as I do to formal assessments. An interesting conversation held during recess with a student, that reflects understanding of a classroom subject, is just as valuable to me as any classroom assignment.

The political and ethical implication of our choices on what to assess, which are the points on which we base success or failure, weigh heavily upon me. We are living through a historical moment in which our education system is preoccupied with producing a uniform product that unblinkingly accepts the framework in which we live our lives. But, while there are universal human characteristics, and we do in fact all have very much in common, at the micro level there is great diversity: no two teachers are the same just as no two students are the same. And yet, in school, we are expected to teach and learn as if we all learned the same and understood the same, and made meaning the same. The system works efficiently at squashing our children's, and their teacher's, unique potentials. As such, assessment serves as a tool that enforces the dominant, dehumanizing understanding of education, but not necessarily so. Assessment could be used to nurture our student's creativity and foster curiosity and love of experience; it could be used to empower and free our students.