

SHALL WE EVALUATE?

Assessment is one of those topics that can be fraught with exciting possibilities or daunting fears. It deserves close scrutiny because we face it so often in school, at work, and increasingly in the church. In this issue of the JOURNAL, authors from different levels and geographical locations will address the topic of assessment from multiple perspectives. It is their goal to help you think about testing, grading, and measurement in new ways.

As we consider assessment, we should ask ourselves why we evaluate and what we hope to accomplish. This is as relevant for churches and governments as for individuals and schools.

A popular current educational theory, often obscured by highly theoretical language, asserts that every student can and should be evaluated by the same standard. Increasingly, this idea appears in calls for national standards, national testing, and international competitiveness. The assumption behind the theory is that everyone should learn the same things, and each student should reach the same quantifiable standard. To many people, this sounds like an efficient, measurable goal—that students who graduate from an institution should all look the same, educationally speaking. This cookie cutter approach to education sounds good, but it fails to account for human diversity in a variety of areas—intelligence, experience, gender, culture, and socio-economic background, as well as learning styles and disabilities.

Given the far-reaching influence of educational practices on the church, it is vital that we consider how and why we assess students—and each other.

Since Adventist schools are part of a system that includes pastors, health-care professionals, and business people, as well as educators, the kind of assessment we use in one entity can have a direct effect on the people who work in other parts of the system. Pastors attend Adventist schools and then work in churches; health-care professionals attend Adventist schools and then work in Adventist medical institutions, and teachers teach them all. Therefore, the assessment practices we use in Adventist schools can have a profound effect. They shape the future lives of our students, as well as attitudes toward assessment in schools and the institutional church (and among parents!). Given the

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Assessment

Examinations, Assessment, Grading, Judging. These terms bring to mind stresses most of us have felt when preparing for evaluation.

What does assessment really tell us? “One of the problems with letter grades is that they can reflect so many things: A child’s effort, his progress, his relative standing in the class, his ability to master certain content. There is little agreement among educators about which of these variables report cards should reflect or how best to express it. Teachers also differ in the kinds of evidence they use to arrive at a letter grade and the weight given to each one, from teacher-made tests and homework assignments, to classroom discussions and group projects.”¹ In light of this, we might wonder what a grade actually means.

Some suggest that evaluation is different from grading. The goal is certainly similar—to make a judgment about someone’s work, intelligence, abilities, or spirituality. According to Webster, *evaluation* means determining the value or worth of something. *Assessment* is determining the “importance, size, or value.” *Testing* is a “critical examination, observation, or evaluation.” To *judge* is “to form an opinion about through careful weighing of evidence and testing of premises.” Are there really significant differences between these

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words? When we evaluate or assess students, how does this affect their self-image? What effect will it have on how others treat them, and on their chances for future opportunities? Do our methods of evaluation inspire students to become lifelong learners? Does the grading system we use prepare them to collaborate in the workplace, or make them excessively competitive? Assessment can either encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning or make them dependent on external motivators to spur achievement.

Much assessment measures learning at the lowest levels of Bloom's Taxon-

omy—knowledge and comprehension. These areas are easy to test since they can be rapidly quantified. There is no room for subjectivity. Unfortunately, we often assess with a goal to quantify every aspect of student learning, even in the arts or spiritual growth. What is the impact of this on students? Are students encouraged by being told that they are failing in spiritual growth? Do they become better writers if the content of their creative papers is consistently condemned?

What do assessment, tests, and grades tell us? When giving a timed test, what are we measuring? Reading speed?

Kinesthetic ability? Quality of previous instruction? Knowledge? Access to information? Do parents and students understand what is meant by the grades that teachers give? When new forms of assessment are used, are parents, school boards, and other constituents informed about the benefits of the new assessment method, or are they even more unsure about the new techniques than they were about letter grades?

Student Perceptions of Assessment

What do students think about testing and evaluation? Does it motivate them? Bore them? Frighten them? Alfie Kohn, author of *Punished by Rewards*, says that “students who are motivated by grades or other rewards typically don't learn as well, think as deeply, care as much about what they're doing, or choose to challenge themselves to the same extent as students who are not grade oriented.”² If this is true, then we need to rethink our assessment systems to make our students the focus for both learning and evaluation.

Rarely do grades mean to students what they mean to teachers. Consider, for example, the difference between an A and an F. One is acceptable, although not necessarily affirming. An A for a person who didn't study or who feels undeserving simply means to that student that the teacher was an easy grader. An F means failure, no matter what the reason, whether failure to study, illness, or blizzard. To all of us, an F means that we failed—with or without good reason. But what about a C? Is it a good grade? If you have any question about that, ask a room full of elementary children if a C is a good grade. You might get them to say that a C is OK if they tried hard, or if last time they got a D. What if last grading period they got an A? Is a C still a good grade? Don't conjure up a

rationale for why it is or isn't, but consider what happens in the mind of the student.

What would happen if somehow we could turn the argument around? Not talk about grades in terms of sorting students. Rather, we would talk about how well content was covered. If all—or only half—of the students in a course flunk, what does that mean? First, it means the students didn't learn the subject. Could it also mean nothing was taught? It is easy to place the blame on students. They didn't study, they didn't pay attention, they are learning impaired, they come from bad homes, or they weren't prepared by previous teachers. These are all common assumptions used to place blame. All of them divert attention from teaching and evaluation methods. Students would be better served if we sought to teach in a way they can learn, and that motivates them to do so.

What does assessment really tell us?

Ask yourself how it feels to be evaluated. This will give you a clearer understanding of how your assessment practices affect your students. How do you feel about the views of a superintendent, principal, or supervisor with whom you do not see eye-to-eye? Are you motivated by criticism and bad evaluations, or do you feel resentment when others do not understand your hard work and planning? Does being a student somehow make one immune to red X's all over one's papers, low grades, or criticism? If not, then we should at least examine assessment and evaluation to see if we can improve student learning and our own educational practices.

Several years ago, one of my students related an experience from graduate school. At the beginning of the

course, the teacher said there would be seven A's, 10 B's, and five C's given for that course. The student looked around the room and saw seven doctoral students, 10 master's students, and five undergraduates. At the end of the course, the doctoral students got A's, the master's students got B's, and the undergraduates got C's. It is possible the students' achievement was neatly divided, but it does seem reasonable that at least one master's-level student could have earned an A. We might ask what the "evaluation" really meant. More importantly, we might want to know how the instructor knew at the beginning of the course what the quality of student work would be.

Alternative Assessments

Increasingly, teachers at all levels are looking for better ways to measure student learning. At a recent conference of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development in Orlando, Florida, where the subject of assessment

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was addressed, Howard Gardner argued that making sure students understand and are able to use knowledge is critically important. Therefore, teachers should take note of obstacles to understanding, which include

- Short-answer assessments,
- “Test-text” assessment, which may foster memorization rather than understanding,
- Teacher-student compromise, when teacher and student agree not to push each other too hard, and
- Pressure to cover the textbook.

Other presenters suggested that multiple methods of assessment would provide excellent information about student learning to students, parents, and teachers. Three suggested types are as follows:

- *Student-centered classroom assessment.* Students receive clear examples of excellent work and poor work prior to beginning a project. They then work in cooperative groups where they discuss, read, plan, and set criteria for their own learning.

- *Student-involved record keeping.* One example of this is a growth portfolio in which students keep track of their own learning and proficiency.

- *Student-involved communication about their own achievement.* In this assessment plan, students lead their own parent/teacher/student conference. They are responsible for communicating their learning to their parents and teacher by

careful planning throughout the grading period.³

Conclusion

This issue of the JOURNAL presents numerous perspectives. The evidence the authors bring, the conclusions they present—and their multiple views—indicate the complexity of the evaluation problem. One purpose of this issue is to raise questions that need to be asked again about our own practices. Both within and outside the church, assessment is being mandated for people at every level—everyone from administrators to pastors; from students to teachers; from workers to employers. Given this penchant to evaluate, we must understand what the results will be on stu-

dents—and on each of us.

Looking at the Results

Now back to the original question: Why do we evaluate, and what do we hope to accomplish? We should reflect on assessment's goals. If the outcome of evaluation is to make pastors more Christlike, teachers teach better, and students learn more, then possibly they should be evaluated. Clearly, assessment itself needs to be assessed through an honest and ongoing process. What is its purpose? Control or judging? Helping us produce “thinkers, and not mere reflectors” who are prepared for entrance into the heavenly kingdom? If assessment only makes critics and causes discouragement, or if it merely compares student with student or ourselves among ourselves, what have we gained? Are we truly wise? ☞

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3. “Obstacles to Understanding,” *Education Update* 39:8 (December 1997), p. 7.

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