

Beyond Standardized Truth

IMPROVING TEACHING AND LEARNING THROUGH INQUIRY-BASED READING ASSESSMENT



SCOTT FILKINS

Principles
in Practice
LITERACY ASSESSMENT

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A young man with short hair is sitting and reading a book. He is wearing a dark-colored t-shirt. The book he is holding is open, and the pages are visible. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The overall image has a soft, slightly desaturated tone.

Confessions of an Unprincipled Reading Assessor

I imagine that people in other professions have recurring dreams related to the shared fears and stresses of their work, but I like to think that the nightmares teachers have are especially telling of our daily anxieties.

As an undergraduate in teacher education, for example, I'd occasionally have the dream in which I showed up to a lecture hall for a final exam, only to realize that I'd never attended the class or done any of the readings in preparation for it. I'm happy to say that this dream, rooted in my persistent fear of being caught underprepared, never happened in real life.

When I began teaching high school English in 1998, the setting and specifics of this dream changed, but the anxiety fueling it did not. Around late July, I'd start having dreams of arriving to teach a class in which not a single student was familiar. I'd have no idea of the focus of the course, not to mention the plan for the period that had just begun. Unlike the dream from undergraduate days, variations of this one *have* occurred in real life: being told one Friday afternoon in my first year of teaching that my last period honors English class would be replaced by a section of Algebra 1 the next Monday comes to mind.

These harmless dreams are ones I would have off and on (as I suspect most of us do) depending on the time of year and associated level of anxiety. But here's a related dream I never did have—nor did anything close to it happen in real interactions with my students or their families. I realize now, though, that I should have been worrying more about this scenario, or the chronic underpreparation it represents, than about phantom exams or surprise teaching assignments. Permit me to narrate:

It's the evening of spring parent–teacher conferences. I sit down with a parent or guardian and pull from my carefully organized file folder the grade sheet for the student whose name falls next on the blue appointment card. On the grade report, perfect rows and columns announce the title of each assignment and the score the student earned on it, alongside the points possible. At the top of the sheet, the student's level of achievement in my class comes into neat focus, in a bolded percentage calculated to two decimal places of precision.

I've also written attendance information at the top of the page; parents like to know when their understanding of a student's attendance differs from the school's. The parent or guardian will also no doubt ask how the student can improve his or her grade, so I've taken the time to highlight some missing assignments. I've prepared all this information in advance to direct the conversation to its typically optimistic end, when the parent and I shake hands and thank each other for the time we've taken out of our busy schedules to talk with each other.

But this time the parent thanks me for all this information, perhaps just a little dismissively, and says, "I'm not all that interested in points and averages. I want to know how well my child is reading. What's be good at? What kinds of patterns are you noticing?" The classroom begins to spin. Unseen violins sbriek wildly. But the parent persists: "And what are you doing to help him?"

If I had ever dreamed such a situation, I can imagine myself responding in a couple of different ways. In one, I bolt up and out of bed in a cold sweat, find my copy of *Mosaic of Thought* (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997), and vow again to transform some of its ideas into classroom practice. The parent has every right to ask such a question, and I need to figure out a way to get him or her an answer—quickly.

The other version of the response involves a shift into lucid dreaming. Just as I sometimes take control of dreams in which I'm flying (because I know it is so unreal that it has to be a concoction of my imagination), I realize that a parent asking focused, meaningful questions about my assessment of a high school student's reading ability is just *not* that likely to happen. In this version, I capitalize on the opportunity by starting to ask the kinds of questions that teachers often have of parents, but are too polite to ask. . . .

Unpacking My History with Assessment

I know it may seem odd to begin a book about reading assessment with a series of dreams, including a fictional one at that. But the topics of teaching and learning, preparation, expectations, anxiety, surprise, and uncertainty are actually quite germane to assessment, particularly school-based assessment. At the risk of indulging in too much analysis of my own dreams, let me take a moment to clarify what the ones I've shared do and don't have in common. The first is merely an anxious brain misfire, a representation of the fear of being helpless in a situation in which I actually had quite a bit of control. The second is more understandable. After all, it's impossible to be fully prepared for the situations that can and do come our way as teachers. In the hours between falling asleep grading and getting up for school the next day, sometimes our brains avenge themselves by playing tricks on us.

The third dream is more complicated. At the time I represent in that fictional dream, I had nearly complete control over what was taught and assessed in my classroom. But without a strong written curriculum, and with a relatively thin knowledge base about how adolescents read and develop as readers, I made a number of decisions about what to privilege and what to marginalize through assessment that I now see as inappropriate. The fact that a parent or guardian of one of the students in my class—a vested partner in the process of education—could ask a question so deeply related to one of the fundamental components of success in my class, and that I was completely unprepared to answer? That's truly frightening.

What I ended up assessing in my English classes (and hence best understanding about my students) was related to the traditional *stuff* of a language arts curriculum—response to literature, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and so forth—but it was also about compliance and completion of assignments. As I look back now, many of those assignments probably weren't all that important, and they definitely didn't give the students or me much information about how they were developing as readers. In essence, I was assessing student *engagement* with content in English, but I was unable to assess student engagement and growth in the key process of reading. To put it another way, I was meeting only one of the “dual goals” that Afflerbach (2004) challenges us to pursue—both “of understanding how students are learning content, *and* how their reading achievement is related to this learning” (p. 384, emphasis added).

I certainly wasn't alone in my department, school, or district in exhibiting a significant gap between *valuing* reading, a skill that is central to success in English (and in nearly

Look at a student grade printout or the paper or online gradebook you keep. What do you seem to value based on the assessments recorded there? What information does your gradebook offer about students' content acquisition and development as readers? How closely do your core values as a teacher match the assessment information implied in grading documents that you share with students, families, other teachers, and administrators?

every other academic learning context), and actually being able to evaluate *growth* in reading. At a certain point, teachers in my school did realize that we needed some way to determine student grade-level equivalency and to look for evidence of growth over the course of a year. To that end, we began administering the Gates-MacGinitie reading assessment to our ninth and tenth graders. The test confirmed our suspicions: in classroom after classroom, our students were reading at vastly different levels, and many were significantly below grade level, even in honors classes. We gave the assessment again in the spring, but in between and afterward, we did not use the information we had gleaned to adjust what we taught or how we taught it.

These gaps—both between what we valued and what we assessed and between what we assessed and how we used the assessment information—left the English departments of the two high schools in my district vulnerable to a hostile takeover by a standardized assessment-crazed group of administrators who were hired specifically to close an achievement gap under a federal consent decree through the Office of Civil Rights. Without taking time to assess the state of our written English curriculum (which was weak) or our teachers' understanding of the relationships between curriculum, assessment, and instruction (which were not well developed), this administration demanded that we produce reading tests to be administered to our students every six to nine weeks.

We voiced concerns about the process, and these concerns were interpreted as resistance. We voiced a lack of knowledge about test construction, and our claims were ignored as passive noncompliance. Teams of us were pulled from class or paid outside of the school day to write reading assessments. A full-time job was created to copy all of these tests, coordinate their deployment, and oversee the distribution of reams of paper covered in red, yellow, and green ink, signifying a student's supposed level of mastery of any number of state standards. All of this went on despite our very open declaration of uncertainty about what the tests were actually assessing. We remained largely silent about our inability to respond to what the test results said (for fear of being called out on a gap in our professional knowledge), but that was certainly a significant issue as well.

I'd like to say that for the vast majority of us, these assessments did absolutely nothing to change our daily classroom lives. In truth, though, our students lost too many days of instruction to the administration of these tests. At one point, a colleague totaled the number of days devoted to this kind of assessment in her junior English class—including time spent taking practice ACTs, then the main component of our state test, and the state exam itself—and came up with fifteen. That's *three entire school weeks* of instruction lost to the administration of tests that teachers did not (and later, we learned, actually *could not*) translate into instructional change.

The other less obvious but just as damaging change this testing regime brought to our classrooms was the vilification of the word *assessment* and the adoption of a philosophical division between the acts of teaching and assessing. Let me be clear: at the worst moments of our district's testing craze, teachers were right to say, "Stop these assessments and let me teach!" But the fact that this desperate request applies to an unproductive assessment climate doesn't justify its overapplication to all kinds of assessment. For all the nightmares that testing created in our schools for a few years, principled classroom-based, inquiry-driven reading assessment is the only answer to the anxious dream I detailed at the start of this chapter. This book seeks to offer portraits of classroom practice that illustrate such assessment.

Assessment Rehab

Another of my goals for writing this book is to reclaim the word *assessment* for high school teachers who are rightfully charged with improving the reading ability of all their students. Since I've shared a bit about the unprincipled assessment activity I have been involved in, I'll also be transparent about the rehabilitation process I went through (or, more accurately, am going through) to repair my relationship with assessment. The components of my rehabilitation include the following:

Becoming very familiar with *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005)

As I'll discuss later, goal clarity as represented through deep teacher knowledge and strong written curricula is an absolute necessity for effective assessment of reading (or of anything else, for that matter). Though I'm far from expert enough to recommend one theory of curriculum development over another, I do recommend that teachers read *Understanding by Design*, particularly the chapters on understanding and assessment. Since a significant goal of reading is understanding—and reading is a key process that facilitates understanding—you can in some ways treat the entire book as a text about reading. The authors' commonsense approach to the centrality of assessment in the teaching and learning process is incredibly valuable. Also useful for me is their reassurance that some things (such as how well an adolescent reads) are difficult to know; we need multiple, flexible measures to inform even our most tenuous sense of what most learners can do with text.

Participating in school-based professional learning communities (PLCs)

With their strong focus on collaborative curriculum development and checking for understanding and growth, professional learning communities (or, more aptly, the time invested in allowing such collaboration to flourish) have had a significant impact on my practice. As our school un-

derwent state-mandated restructuring, we committed to setting aside at least one hour a week for each course (most core curriculum courses for ninth and tenth graders meet four hours a week) to determine what we value instructionally and to examine student work that helps us check on progress toward our goals. I cannot agree more with the assertion in the International Reading Association (IRA)–National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) *Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing*, Revised Edition (the 2010 document by the Joint Task Force on Assessment of IRA and NCTE that is the basis of this book; more on those standards in a moment) that “improving teachers’ assessment expertise requires ongoing professional development, coaching, and access to professional learning communities . . . [because] teachers need to feel safe to share, discuss, and critique their own work in public forums with their peers” (p. 14). Central to my improved view of the role of assessment was our determination to keep the process of examining students’ progress against our stated goals rooted in authentic classroom work and fueled by teacher-led conversations about that work.*

Reading a range of very smart books on formative assessment

Books such as *Transformative Assessment* (Popham, 2008) and *Checking for Understanding* (Fisher & Frey, 2007) offer both strong theory and practical application of assessment as an integral part of the instructional cycle. Still, although they convinced me that purposeful short-cycle assessment was worth investigating, almost uniformly the books focus on measuring understanding of content, not the actual process of reading (recall Aflerbach’s comment about the need to look for evidence of both). They occasionally offer examples from English classrooms, but these examples typically showcase the development and assessment of student writing, where the product is more visible. I found myself continuing to wonder what formative assessment in reading would look like for adolescents.

Picking up a copy of the revised IRA–NCTE *Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing* (2010)

When I was at the International Reading Association convention in 2010, I grabbed the *Standards* as an impulse purchase in the bookstore checkout line. Its compact nature made it easy to start and stop reading between sessions. These assessment standards, the undergirding document of this book, gave clarity of language and solidity of philosophy to my growing understanding of how I could help my students read better by getting smarter at learning what they could do. (Note: The *Standards*, minus the cases studies and glossary, are reprinted in the front matter of this book. The *Standards* in their entirety are also available as a free download from both the IRA and NCTE websites.)

*For more information about the values of and structures that support such work, see the NCTE 2011 Policy Research Brief on communities of practice at www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/CC/0212nov2011/CC0212Policy.pdf.

The IRA–NCTE assessment standards (hereafter referred to as the SARW) address assessment in many forms (see Figure 1.1), but this book focuses primarily on what Shepard (2000) calls *classroom assessment*, a kind of assessment different from assessment for grades or for external accountability purposes. The purpose of this kind of assessment is to “be used as a part of instruction to support and enhance learning,” rather than as “an occasion to mete out rewards and punishments” (Shepard, p. 10). The SARW offer a similar view of “productive and powerful assessments,” referring to them as “the formative assessments that occur in the daily activities of the classroom” (p. 13). I mention this distinction because the other kinds of assessment—summative assessments that generate grades and standardized tests that hold schools (and certain agents within the schools) accountable—will still be administered and do have a certain value within the system.

But the kind of classroom assessment you’ll be reading about in this book—assessment that intends to be as consonant with the SARW as my colleagues and I are able to be at this point in our professional practice—happens in addition to and alongside those other kinds of assessment. Sometimes the three kinds of assessment—formative, summative, and standardized—will overlap, but part of the story of professional growth this book documents is my district’s eventual understanding that tests such as the ACT and tests modeled on it (such as our so-called quarterly

Figure 1.1: Understanding formative and summative assessment.

The SARW offer these comparative definitions of *formative* and *summative* assessment. Although these definitions, quoted directly, discuss the typical form these assessments might take (e.g., a portfolio conference versus an end-of-chapter test), I view the most significant difference between the two kinds of assessment as *whether the teacher is able to change instruction as a result of what is learned through it*. In other words, an assessment given to two students could be formative for one student and summative for the other if the teacher learns something new about one student and not the other, leading to a change in instruction for one and not the other. An assessment can be labeled as formative or summative only *after* it is given and the student and teacher have an opportunity to act on the information (or not).

<i>Formative assessment</i>	<i>Summative assessment</i>
Formative assessment, often referred to as assessment <i>for</i> learning, is the assessment that is done before and during teaching to inform instruction. It is assessment that informs instruction. Formative assessment includes things like teacher–student conferences, listening in on student book discussions, taking records of children’s oral reading, examining students’ writing pieces, and so forth. Though these assessments might be standardized, they often are not. To be formative, an assessment must affect instruction. (SARW, p. 49)	Summative assessment, often referred to as assessment <i>of</i> learning, is the after-the-fact assessment in which we look back at what students have learned, such as end-of-course or end-of-year examinations. The most familiar forms are the end-of-year standardized tests, though in classrooms we also assess students’ learning at the end of a unit. These assessments are likely to be uniform or standardized. (SARW, p. 52)

Reflect on the kinds of conversations around reading assessment that typically occur at your school. Are high-stakes standardized assessments the only ones that get any legitimate “air time” at meetings and staff development sessions? What happens when teachers challenge the implied authority of state reading test scores?

reading assessments)—*do not and cannot ever* give us the fine-grained, context-specific information we need in order to teach our kids more effectively, no matter how much we want those tests to do so, and in spite of what their designers might tell us. The SARW call for stakeholders within a school community to avoid “endow[ing] test scores with the power to tell more than they are able” (p. 18). It’s easy to tell administrators that most standardized tests “do not adequately reflect a complex model of literacy” (p. 18), but it’s significantly more challenging to offer an alternative view.

I’ve found that demonstrating achievement gains resulting from purposeful, careful, effective classroom assessment is the only antidote to such test worship, and I count this as another goal of this book.

Toward a More Principled Role as Assessor

A key image in my third teacher nightmare (the one that I realize now is actually scarier for never having happened in real life) is the student grade printout, which is nominally full of classroom assessments (to misuse Shepard’s term). In reality, this printout is rivaled only by the Scantron sheet as the document that symbolizes the flaws in our current era of school assessment. The official, computer-generated appearance of these grade sheets hides the hundreds of human choices involved in assessment—not only in the myriad scores awarded to all the various tasks, but also which and what kinds of tasks get counted in the first place. Because the mathematics of the grade is made to seem unquestionable, the much more important concerns—namely, the principles determining what should be assessed, and how—are given a free pass as well.

Sometimes in our desire to be efficient, accurate, and authoritative, we overlook that which is most central to our work as teachers. The SARW remind us that assessment, particularly in a culture that puts so much emphasis on corporate standardized tests, is too often represented as “merely a technical process.” We have to challenge ourselves to remember that assessment is, in fact, “always representational and interpretive because it involves representing children’s development” (p. 9). I find it important to acknowledge that central tension within our profession, particularly in regard to adolescent literacy development, given the overwhelming misconception that high school students are “done” learning how to read by the time they are teens.

I was very intentional with the title for the first chapter of this book. I wanted to be clear that I would be airing a bit of individual and institutional laundry here;

it's impossible for me to write about assessment without detailing some of the missteps I've taken or been involved in. In choosing the word *unprincipled* to describe my identity as a reading assessor, however, I hoped to suggest that while I was definitely doing some things wrong, I was also stumbling into doing some things right as well. I simply didn't have a clear and unwavering mission for assessment. In the language of the SARW, I was not "aware of and deliberate about" my role as an assessor, so I couldn't judge whether my assessments were effective (p. 13). Getting students to comply with my requests for work in order to generate points to put on the grade sheet is the most unifying reason I can see in my early classroom practice, but that one is almost too base to admit (though, of course, it's largely true).

When I think back to the changing tasks that showed up on my students' grade sheets over the first few years of my career, I do see that I was a conscious experimenter with how I assessed as I developed as a beginning teacher. As pressure over lagging reading scores mounted in our school and beyond, I rather clumsily pursued a number of investigations into what my students could do as readers. Most basically, I started to ask students to *read* on the tests I gave at the end of a unit or major work. Borrowing perhaps too liberally from the tactics of the professors of my undergraduate literature surveys, I would ask students to read excerpts from the book under study and write short critical responses. Definitely borrowing too liberally from the ACT or the Advanced Placement exam, I would pull short excerpts from the novel or play we'd read and ask a series of multiple-choice questions getting at comprehension and application of pertinent literary elements.

But these assessments did little for me as a teacher and even less, I suspect, for my students. I might have pondered surprises or felt pleased with some good results, but once the numbers landed on the grade sheet, the assessment's function in the instructional process was over. Using the formal language of assessment, these tests were completely summative because they offered me almost no information that would help me change instruction, as a formative assessment must.

So even these, my best attempts to assess reading, were thwarted by a series of "lacks" that, taken together, get at the heart of the value of the SARW:

1. I didn't quite know what I was assessing.
2. I didn't have a good enough, clear enough—principled enough—reason for assessing whatever it was I was assessing.
3. Had I known what I really wanted to assess, I still wouldn't have known how to assess it.
4. I didn't have the curricular or instructional means to respond effectively to any information I gathered through the assessments I *did* deliver.

We all enter the classroom with certain preconceived stances toward reading assessment. For many of us, that stance involves some variation of “That’s not my job!” Take some time to reflect on what assessment attitudes and practices you brought with you as a result of schooling and your own past experiences. What new habits and practices have you developed over the course of your career? What new skills and insights might you be interested in developing?

The rest of this chapter and, indeed, much of this book continues to trace my journey of “assessment rehab” as I learned, and continue to learn, how to get into the heads of my students as readers and thinkers in order to find out, as best I can, what I need to do next to teach them effectively.

Happily, I’ve not been alone during this process of growth. As an instructional coach at a large comprehensive high school and codirector of a National Writing Project site, I have the privilege of working side by side with smart, dedicated teachers nearly year-round. For this particular project, eight teachers at Central High School allowed me to col-

laborate with them through my role as a coach as teaching and learning occurred in their classrooms:

Will Aldridge, Social Studies—Will is a third-year teacher at Central. Currently he splits his time between social science (where you’ll read about him teaching ninth-grade Ancient Civilizations) and a support class called AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination).

Chris Belt, English—In his second year of teaching, Chris teaches honors and regular-level ninth graders. The class you’ll see him working with is a first-hour honors English class preparing for and reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Chris is a teacher consultant with the University of Illinois Writing Project.

Kathy Decker, English—Kathy has been teaching for eight years, all at Central High School. She teaches accelerated and academic-level juniors. The class you’ll read about was reading Frederick Douglass’s autobiography and *A Lesson Before Dying*; the students have diverse backgrounds that cross the spectrum of ability and motivational levels. Kathy is a teacher consultant with the Eastern Illinois University Writing Project.

Liz Dietz, English—Liz is a first-year educator who teaches sophomore and senior English. You’ll see some of the work she and her honors-level sophomore students did while reading George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*.

Nikelle Miller, Science—Nikki has taught a range of science courses over sixteen years in a variety of settings. Before coming to Central, where she teaches biology and accelerated biology, she was named Chicagoland Lutheran Education Foundation High School Teacher of the Year (2005).

Stephanie Royse, Special Education/Reading—A second-year teacher, Stephanie teaches self-contained reading classes for students receiving special education services and co-teaches with sophomore English teachers.

Faith Sharp, Science—Now in her fourth year of her second career as a high school teacher (she previously conducted research in microbiology), Faith teaches biology and accelerated biology. She is actively involved with Proj-

ect NEURON at the University of Illinois and coaches the academic teams for Science Olympiad and Worldwide Youth in Science and Engineering (WYSE).

Gary Slotnick, English—Gary is the English department chair and teaches Advanced Placement English, honors sophomores, and regular-level senior literature. He has taught for eighteen years—eight at middle school, ten at high school. You’ll read about his work with a co-taught senior English class during a short story unit and while reading *Hamlet*.

As you might assume from the list of teachers participating in this project, most of the classroom scenarios you’ll be reading about depict students who are reading as part of the day-to-day processes of developing understanding of content in their subject area courses. On the other hand, the scenarios from Stephanie Royle’s class and my own come from high school reading classes, where students have been placed for additional support. Knowing that the work that goes on in our classes differs from other, more content-focused courses, I have worked to make the assessment and response techniques as applicable to other situations as possible.

As you continue to read, you may be surprised that in a book about reading *assessment* what you’re actually seeing are descriptions of *teaching*. Sure, I offer some tools and techniques we developed to gather information about what students could and couldn’t do with text in a particular situation. But the SARW hold that the “central function of assessment . . . is . . . to improve the quality of teaching and learning and thereby to increase the likelihood that all members of the society will acquire a full and critical literacy” (p. 16). Therefore, just as important as the tools and “results” of assessment—in fact, more important if we’re to reclaim assessment’s centrality to the acts of teaching and learning—is the interconnection between teaching goals, assessment, and response through instruction.

Goal Clarity: The Key to Assessment

Confusing, ineffective, or harmful assessment can have many root causes, but none is as likely as the lack of goal clarity. One way to think about assessment is as the *search for evidence of a change that you’ve worked to develop*. If you don’t have a really clear picture of what that change is, seeking evidence of it is bound to be frustrating at best and damaging at its worst. The popular literature about educational assessment makes this case well, and it’s a good point, but the resulting proliferation of standards (and eventual development of sub-standards, benchmarks, and performance indicators) is being sold too simplistically as the remedy. Some otherwise useful professional literature on assessment falls into the unfortunate habit of suggesting that teachers need to divide and subdivide challenging content and complex

processes—such as those involved with reading—into the most minute, observable pieces, often referred to as “learning targets.” When assessing reading development in adolescents, however, I feel it is crucial not to confuse goal *simplicity* with goal *clarity*. Reading may have components that are conceptually separable, but in reality they are not separate; assessment of the parts does not necessarily give us a realistic picture of the whole.

When I think back to my school’s earliest efforts to make reading assessment and instruction a cross-disciplinary endeavor, I recall using the framework offered by our state’s test, then the ACT. The literature about the ACT divided reading into eight skills: determining meanings of words, finding the main idea, making generalizations, and so forth. Desperate for a framework on which to hang our professional development efforts as well as our own nascent understandings of reading, we used those skills as our operational definition of reading—without giving much regard to crucial issues such as text complexity, current level of performance, prior knowledge, and the cognitive and metacognitive processes that fuel the act of reading. We fell into the trap that the SARW warn against—“fragment[ing] literacy rather than represent[ing] its complexity . . . [and] omit[ting] important aspects of literacy such as self-initiated learning, questioning author’s bias, perspective taking, multiple literacies, social interactions around literacy, metacognitive strategies, and literacy dispositions” (p. 17).

While there are many places a teacher can go to begin or continue to build a strong knowledge base about reading (see the annotated bibliography at the end of this book for some titles I’ve found particularly useful), I’m going to rely here on a framework set forth in Stephen Kucer’s chapter “What We Know about the Nature of Reading,” a framework built out of Kucer’s research (Kucer, 2008; see also Kucer, 1991; Kucer, 2005; Kucer & Silva, 2006) and the work of NCTE’s Commission on Reading. I like this framework because, above all, it rings true with my own experiences as a reader, as a developing teacher of reading, and as a parent who has had the delight of observing and supporting a son as he learns to read. In addition to those reasons, Kucer’s framework offers a certain clarity about reading that has helped me situate my assessment practice. But it also possesses a richness that constantly challenges me not to oversimplify the act of reading in ways that most standardized assessment and popular packaged curricula tend to do.

Before summarizing some of the key information from Kucer’s conception of reading, I should mention that it is possible to employ and respond to classroom-based reading assessments such as the ones described in the chapters that follow without an exceptionally strong background in understanding how people read. While I certainly concur with the SARW’s assertion that the “more knowledgeable teachers are on the subjects of reading and writing and the more observant they are of students’ literate behavior, the more productive their assessments will be”

(p. 14), teachers who feel undereducated about reading can rest assured that the assessment processes I highlight will actually prompt and facilitate a certain degree of this learning for them when they assess their students. We don't have the luxury of waiting until we all feel *expert* in reading to start inquiring into how our students are developing as readers and thinkers; rather, such assessment-based inquiry is a natural and effective way to begin developing that expertise.

Kucer's framework (2008) suggests that reading possesses four *dimensions*: linguistic, cognitive, sociocultural, and developmental. The use of the word *dimensions*, as opposed to, say, *components* or *stages*, is appealing. Imagine moving a large piece of furniture from one room in your house to another. The most important dimension of a couch, for instance, might seem to be its length because you need to make sure it will fit along the wall in the room to which you're moving it. But when you get to a doorway, the length of the couch suddenly doesn't matter as much as its width. If the couch is too wide for the doorway, the concern might then become the height of the couch as you turn it on its side for a better fit.

In Kucer's framework, the word *dimensions* similarly suggests that linguistic, cognitive, sociocultural, and developmental factors (not even *factors* is a good substitute) are always and inseparably present in an act of reading. One may be more salient in a given situation, and we may be looking at only one in a particular assessment setting, but that doesn't mean the other three aren't operating. We're simply choosing to ignore them for the moment because, after all, we cannot attend to everything all the time. It's important, though, to keep reminding ourselves that even when we privilege one dimension (and this book will indeed privilege some dimensions over others), the others don't "go away." Making a commitment to supporting our adolescent readers in all four dimensions gives us the best chance of success.

Kucer explains that in the *linguistic dimension*, the reader is "code breaker," and must call upon all of his or her resources relating to the systemic relationships between written language, sound, and sense. This dimension, like all of the dimensions, is complex, but thankfully for teachers of most older adolescents, the requisite fundamental understandings of letter-sound relationships, grammar, and syntax are so deeply ingrained as to be invisible. Most readers in high school have achieved a high degree of automaticity in this dimension, and they don't have to spend much cognitive energy here. This is not to say that cognitive energy isn't *required* in this dimension: older students who struggle with fluency give us clear evidence that these dimensions are not magically tied to age or grade level. Ignoring a dimension simply because we believe a student should already be "beyond it" is faulty thinking. Just as faulty, however, is the belief that focusing *only* on a particular dimension will lead to improvement in the realm of literacy development as a whole, as some programmatic assessment and intervention approaches suggest.

Kucer's second dimension, the *cognitive dimension*, depicts the reader as meaning-maker and is, I suspect, the dimension that will be most familiar to secondary teachers. After all, we think of younger students as focusing heavily on the linguistic dimension because they are "learning to read." Once that's out of the way, students are asked to "read to learn" and make meaning from text that supports learning in the various content areas. "A cognitive discussion of literacy," Kucer explains, "concerns those mental processes, strategies, or procedures that the individual engages so as to construct meaning" (2008, p. 35). We know quite a bit about those processes and strategies now (predicting, visualizing, connecting, and the like), and we understand that they need to be modeled and taught as well—to the extent that they have in some cases become the overt focus of instruction to the detriment of the complexity of understanding (Fisher & Frey, 2008b).

Factors such as the reader's background and experience with language, as well as his or her purpose(s) for reading, create a frame for a reading event in which the reader uses the aforementioned strategies and processes as he or she "construct[s] an understanding of the text . . . [and] monitors and evaluates the meanings being generated" (Kucer, 2008, p. 37). Adding to the complexity (and intriguing beauty) of this dimension: *as a result of the exertion of all this cognition, the reader is cognitively changed*. When, for example, a student summons background knowledge about race and racism to comprehend and respond to a chapter from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, that student's background knowledge and understanding of race and racism are themselves challenged and expanded by the interaction between text and reader. What teachers look for through assessment, then, is a combination of the cognitive processes that lead to change (which are, by definition, invisible) and evidence of the change itself (which is also invisible). These two concepts—on their own and together—become a major focus of the assessment work portrayed in this book.

The *sociocultural* dimension of reading, representing "the reader's knowledge of how to use texts in socially appropriate ways and the ability to read critically" (Kucer, 2008, p. 43), is one that likely will seem least familiar to most teachers, but not because it is the least important. When teachers are given a moment to think about what they themselves value most about reading and its uses—from personal enrichment to political engagement and everywhere between and beyond—it's often the dimension we care most about. However, schools have historically attempted to strip literacy of this dimension, largely to make it easier to teach and assess. Traditional literature anthologies, with their prepackaged focus on skills and strategies accessed through a prescribed reading list that has been selected and sequenced with no regard for the diversity of learners in the room, are the most obvious way in which school-based reading is denied its sociocultural dimension. Personal agency and social contexts interact with literacy development in significant ways, and school-based approaches to reading and learning ignore that reality

at their peril. Students' refusal to engage in the learning process is the costly result of such a denial of the sociocultural dimension of reading.

Broadly construed and consonant with the IRA–NCTE standards, assessment itself should never become the *goal* of reading, as I suspect it sometimes seems to students. I imagine all of us harbor a fear that students leave high school believing that the purpose of reading was to answer someone else's questions about texts they didn't care about. We want to teach and assess reading in a way that defies narrow definitions of the complexity of reading and facilitates the nourishment of the generally underserved sociocultural dimension of reading.

Kucer's last dimension of reading, the *developmental* dimension, posits reading as an act of inquiry and frames readers as scientists who use the other dimensions collectively to achieve desired outcomes as they "encounter reading experiences that involve using reading in new and novel ways" (2008, p. 50). This dimension challenges the dominant school-based assessment paradigm of assessing for *mastery* and asks us instead to support a "learner's growth in the ability to effectively and efficiently apply . . . literacy strategies across an ever-widening range of situations" (p. 52). As part of this dimension, Kucer asks us to think of students as *constantly becoming literate*, rather than *being (or not being) literate*. Doing so asks us to rethink assessment not as something that happens, but rather as something that is always happening, an idea I take up next.

Reading Assessment as Purposeful Inquiry

Recall my comments about the Scantron and printed grade sheets—the twin relics of flawed assessment. Among the many problems I have with these documents is that they tend to suck the life out what should be a vibrant and active process: the act and art of figuring out what our students can do and seeking information that will help us better instruct them along the way to doing even more. I've already mentioned some authors whose work is helpful for developing a sense of this kind of teaching stance—James Popham, Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey, and Lorrie Shepard are certainly great places to start—but no single line of thinking has been more influential for me than Frank Serafini's 2000–2001 article from *The Reading Teacher* titled "Three Paradigms of Assessment: Measurement, Procedure, and Inquiry." In it, he builds off the work of Short and Burke (1994) to explain that if our concept of effective curriculum has shifted from rote memorization of facts to more active, constructivist inquiry (as we now understand reading to be), our sense of assessment has to shift along with it from discrete acts of measurement to "a process of inquiry, and a process of interpretation, used to promote reflection concerning students' understandings, attitudes, and literate abilities" (Serafini, 2000–2001, p. 387). Though I know there are those who believe that the primary

purpose of content area reading for adolescents is “hunting for facts,” a more informed and humane understanding frames reading as a constructive act in which students make meaning by combining their lived experiences with the content on the page. Such a view demands that we strive for the kind of assessment that Serafini describes as inquiry.

In addition to the extremes of assessment as either measurement or inquiry, Serafini offers an intermediate paradigm of assessment as *process*, in which the teacher is focused primarily on “assessment procedures, not [on] the underlying purposes of the assessment program, or the epistemological stance” (2000–2001, p. 386). This paradigm aptly describes my previously recounted efforts as a novice English teacher: I was curious to know more about my students as readers, and I engaged in some thoughtful processes to start inquiring. But since the grade sheet was, in fact, the ultimate purpose of any assessment I engaged in, I was stuck in that middle ground and found myself unable to use information to make changes in my teaching or in my students’ development as readers. Without a clear inquiry framework, I was unable to answer the SARW’s emphatic call to become the most important agent of assessment in my classroom, constantly asking questions with the goal of “construct[ing] an understanding of [my] students as literate individuals” (p. 13).

The portraits of classroom practice in the pages that follow document teachers and students who are determined to make the challenging paradigmatic shift to assessment as inquiry. Within any classroom, the accumulated historical attitudes toward and beliefs about assessment, oftentimes framing assessment as an isolated event rather than an ongoing process, are significant and can create barriers to new approaches. Not only do teachers’ beliefs about assessment matter, but departmental and district policy statements and the tools we use to facilitate assessment also figure prominently. And all this says nothing of the significance of the attitudes toward and histories with assessment that students bring with them.

The SARW explain that the inquiry questions that guide effective assessment are “rarely well formulated or structured at the outset. Rather, structure emerges through the process” (p. 49) of asking questions, examining work, collaborating with peers, and asking new questions. The potential scope of such inquiry can be daunting. After all, if secondary teachers were responsible for fewer students, we likely wouldn’t be so drawn to efficiency-oriented tools such as electronic grade books and Scantron sheets in the first place. Within the context of that struggle, however, you’ll see the teachers I focus on in this book making positive changes in classroom practice in direct response to information gained from assessment, as well as gaining voice to communicate more persuasively with administrators about issues of curriculum and assessment. Most important, you’ll see evidence of improved student reading and content acquisition as a result of adults who are

working smarter (and sometimes harder) to support them through principled reading assessment.

Chapter 2 continues to expand on a definition of inquiry-based reading assessment, offering a number of tools developed from two high school reading classes that embody the questions two teachers had about their students. The chapter also offers a theoretical and practical argument for authentic reading assessment, using the assessment terminology of *construct* and *consequential validity* to put standardized reading tests in their appropriate place. Chapter 3 broadens in focus from the assessment tools to the classroom routines that support response to information gained from assessment, illustrating the process of formative assessment. Chapter 4 shifts focus again, framing the inquiry of three classroom teachers not only to improve instruction but also to reflect critically on their own professional practice. Finally, moving from the classroom to other contexts for assessment inquiry, Chapter 5 offers a vision for assessment as an act of caring for our students, a vision that then needs to include as many stakeholders as possible in the processes of teaching, learning, and assessing.

The Common Core State Standards call for students to read and comprehend increasingly complex text as they move through middle and high school. While this is a worthy goal, how will teachers know what kinds of text students are ready for, or how to support students as they develop the necessary skills, habits, and stances to grow as readers?

This book in the Principles in Practice imprint is the result of the author's own efforts to bridge the gap between valuing reading and being able to respond with appropriate instruction or evaluate growth in reading. Scott Filkins brings us into his classroom and the classrooms of his colleagues to demonstrate how high school teachers across the disciplines can engage in inquiry-based reading assessment to support student learning. Based in the IRA–NCTE *Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing*, Revised Edition, the classroom portraits highlight the importance of incorporating genuinely formative assessment into our instruction.

Filkins unpacks his own history with assessment through engaging “confessions” of his early practices and eventual growth toward a framework that situates reading assessment in an inquiry model. Throughout the book, he showcases his colleagues’ attempts to use an inquiry framework, including the various tools and documentation methods that help them inquire into their students’ habits and thoughts as readers, use formative assessment to fuel the gradual release of responsibility framework, and use reading assessment as a means of professional reflection. Finally, Filkins challenges us to broaden the conversation about assessment to a wider range of stakeholders and offers a vision of assessment as an expression of care for the students in our charge.

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