

Customized Versus Standardized Assessments: A Fairy Tale

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Once upon a time there was rapidly changing democratic Country with many, many highly educated, resourceful and creative people. Its mass education system was the envy of the world, but a “new age” economy, new technologies, changing values, and many new and changing careers prompted a need for updating. Prophets and preachers roamed this vast land, calling for a new type of education to match the new age needs. There were many names for this new type of education – Progressive, Standards-Based, New Standards, Outcomes Based - but one thing that most of the gurus, preachers and prophets had in common was a new way of looking at accountability. They mainly called for a system of multiple types of assessments put into collections that represented individual student success and achievement. Many named this a “portfolio” system, similar to a portfolio of artwork collected by artists. Collections of multiple types of student work, consisting of such things as written work, performance tasks and projects, self-reflections, tests, would be put into an individual portfolio that would enable students to show off their work and growth, identify and share their talents and interests, demonstrate their personal strengths and weaknesses, and plan for their future. In effect, this system of assessment allowed for students to develop customized, multiple pathways for demonstrating academic and personal success, along with individual growth, self-analysis, and planning opportunities. New technologies helped to support the development of this approach, and digital portfolios seemed to be the wave of the future.

A number of schools and districts adopted this model, and added other touches – performance task graduation requirements, senior year presentations of portfolios to teachers and outside community members, internships as part of graduation, and the like. And all was moving well along towards a new form of education and assessment that matched the needs of students and accountability in this new era.

But the rulers of this vast and great country had other ideas. They believed that the only important way to measure educational success was through a

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few “standardized” tests, scored by computers, that demonstrated that all students could do a few academic things well (like reading and math). They believed that every student should take these tests at specific times to show that their schools and students were “on track”. They believed that this was the best way to improve the schools of this great land. So they created a law for every public school in the country to obey, to make sure that everyone did these few things well and “no child was left behind”. Their intentions were very noble and regal!

Unfortunately, this new law stopped the new approaches to education and accountability gurus in their tracks! While there were still many people who preached the good word, arguing for a new type of multiple assessment-portfolio accountability system, their ideas were now just “blowing in the wind”. Only a small group of people were listening to them, while everyone else complied with the new law, spent countless hours preparing students for the new standardized tests, and tried to insure that their students did well on these few major assessments.

This new law of the land has now been in existence for a very long time. It has stifled new approaches to accountability that better demonstrate preparedness for this new age we live in and better measure the achievements of each individual student. It has narrowed the curriculum and hindered the implementation of new age goals – promoting rich learning experiences in all subject areas, fostering high levels of thinking, learning how to do research, figuring out how to develop curiosity, promoting multiple forms of writing, learning how to do projects, and helping students find their own strengths and interests and develop their individual talents.

Now the rulers are again reconsidering this law of the land. Even with a new look at assessments going on in the land, it seems as if a few narrow, computer based, traditional assessments will continue to be focus of assessment and accountability.

Perhaps some sanity will rule and we will get back to promoting a sensible and holistic vision of accountability, assessment, and educational excellence that promotes a customized, not standardized education in the new age that we live in. But “happily ever after” right now seems to be a pipe dream.