

The Things That Matter Most

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We analysed, discussed, drafted, critiqued, and revised poem after poem for weeks. At last, the day had arrived when the students donned their best attire, and stayed late after school to say something true. We invited our friends, family, and principal to our event, "The Spoken Heart Poetry Slam." My students were all nerves and jitters, and then it began.

*"I will remember the loneliness
of joining every group
but never really finding one where I belonged."*

*"You'd think silence would be peaceful but it's painful
And that's the thing about pain it demands to be felt"*

*"I lost most of my innocence, most not all
But I lost it when we lost her"*

Each line of their original poems spoke of a sacred memory, their own unique histories. Topics ranged from the death of a loved one to the loss of a friend to those awkward mid-teen year moments.

Did they understand literary device? Metaphor? Simile? Alliteration? Yes, clearly. They also understood a host of standards relating to the writing process, performance technique, and the use of technology. But that's not what anyone remembered when the evening came to an end. Rather it was the power of their words, voices, and hearts that lingered. In reflective essays afterwards, students remarked again and again that this project changed their view on poetry, but more important, it changed their view on themselves.

While "assessment" can seem almost synonymous with "The Test," (or maybe you call it "The Exam" — but I think you know what I mean), it is actually so much more significant. Grant Wiggins, a researcher and consultant on school reform issues in the United States, made popular the term "authentic assessment" in the early 1990s. He defines this as "an examination of student performance on worthy intellectual tasks." Rather than having students merely bubble in the correct answer to a multiple choice question, Wiggins argues that we must think about how they are able to complete certain tasks. Especially as we strive to become teachers for the 21st century, we must not only equip students to recall important information, but also apply it.

As educators, it is our job to revisit assessment and allow it to guide our teaching in a way that is meaningful, authentic, and relevant to our classrooms. Assessment in the classroom is our way to know if our students have understood what it is we are trying to teach. When done often and well, it can be a guide to helping us understand how to approach tomorrow's lessons, and which students require a different approach to comprehension. Assessment is primarily a tool

for communicating what our students are doing and learning. It communicates to the students if they have learned, as well as to our greater community of parents, teachers, and education officials.

The best way to begin thinking about how to do authentic assessment is to consider the goals that you have for your students. Although some of the goals for assessment are dictated by the state or the headteacher, teachers have the power to identify other goals, too. When teaching poetry, do you value that students understand the artistry of great works of poetry, or are you more concerned that students comprehend the essential structures? Or perhaps, like me, you are most concerned that students appreciate the necessity of poetry and understand how to use it as a form of personal expression? Depending on what you value, you will prepare different assessments to judge whether or not they have learnt it. In this way, we can both honour what we are told must be taught, as well as what we most desire to teach.

We must beware the energy that we put into respecting The Test. Examinations are important, but they are not the only thing that is important. Instinctively, I believe that we all understand what is most important when we are standing amongst our students. We see past the standardisation which drove our curriculum design and begin to recognise their individual needs, longings, and fears. Each lesson or project has the potential to impact our students and change their perspectives forever. These are the passions that drive my classroom, and they drive my assessment, too. To engage with these passions requires untangling “assessment” from official inspections and final exams so that we can reclaim our enthusiasm for the things that matter most.

Wiggins, Grant (1990). The case for authentic assessment. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, 2(2).