

When is Assessment REALLY Assessment?

By Cynthia Weatherly

The Christian Conscience | Vol. 1, No. 9 | 1995 | pp. 28-32, 50
(also included in "the deliberate dumbing down of america...A Chronological Paper Trail",
Charlotte Thomson Iserbyt, 1999, page A-44)

WHY ARE THE NEW-FANGLED TESTS CALLED 'ASSESSMENTS'? THE ANSWER IS SHOCKING!

During preparation for a workshop on educational policy in 1982 I was asked by the host organization to prepare a glossary of terms pertaining to my presentation. That request seemed simple enough and a reasonable one, so I set about compiling terms related to CBE (Competency-Based Education) (forerunner of Outcome-Based Education and promulgated by the same man Bill Spady), our fad-of-the-moment in educational reformation toward illiteracy in Georgia.

As I said, the task seemed simple enough. However, while still in the "A's" of the alphabet, I developed an overwhelming respect for professional compilers of glossaries. The first word block I encountered was "assessment". Sure it was familiar; we all knew it meant 'test'; but the longer I struggled to apply that definition to CBE the more elusive "assessment's" definition became.

The latest word for 'test' was "instrument" and that proved easy to explain. But, "assessment" was a broader term, "assessment" was the noun form of the verb "assess". What did "assess" actually mean? The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) had been in use since its development in the latter 1960's. Had we overlooked a change in emphasis by the Federal level of education implied by the use of the word "assessment" that could be significant?

Receiving no help from my small hill of accumulated state department of education materials relating to assessment, I decided to "read the instruction manual": (Webster's New World Dictionary.) Webster's clearly stated:

- "assess":** 1. to set an estimated value on (property, etc.) for taxation 2. to set the amount of (a tax, fine, damages, etc.) 3. to impose a fine, tax, or special payment on (a person or property) 4. to impose (an amount) as a fine, tax, etc. 5. to estimate or determine the significance, importance, or value of; evaluate.

"assessment": 1. the act of assessing 2. the amount assessed.

This definition disturbed me a little. I had assumed that "assessment" was just the latest educationese for a broad-based test. Had I missed something somewhere? To accomplish the task at hand — the glossary — I crafted a definition that read like this:

"Assessment": an estimation; determination of the significance or value of. As used in education, a general term for measuring student progress. Conflict in definition occurs when considering that this is a measurement process that is used to determine the value or significance of a particular

outcome in educational performance. Therefore, it is not a true measurement, but a process of assigning value to specific tasks, creating a cumulative score for performance instead of an accurate measurement against a standard."

It sounded good at the time and spoke to the question of "what are we testing?" which was a growing concern due to the nature of Competency-Based Education's life role skills competencies, which were going to dictate our educational goals — just like "OBE" does today. Even though satisfied to have introduced the idea that there may be a conflict within the definition of "assessment" as an educational term, I was bothered that I could find no definitions in other dictionaries, including legal ones, which did not have primary meanings related to assigning a value for tax purposes. "Assessment" is primarily a legal term; in fact, the use of the word "instrument" could carry a legal connotation as well. Disturbing.

THE FEDERAL ACCOUNTING PROCESS

In March of 1984 I had the privilege of giving testimony supporting stringent regulations for the Pupil Privacy Act (the Hatch Amendment) which amended the General Education Provisions Act to offer protection from intrusive questioning, programs, and the record-keeping for parents and students.

Again, preparation for that testimony caused me to review the National Center for Educational Statistics' handbook series known as the "State Educational Records and Reports Series". Specifically, Handbook IIR — the Financial Accounting Handbook — alluded to a "unified accounting system" based on the process known as **Planning, Programming and Budgeting System (PPBS)** which was to be used by all school systems. PPBS involves mandated goals and constant adjustment of resources to ensure that goals are met... the system that is still in use today. In testifying, I drew a projected conclusion:

If our financial resource reporting is going to be unified by such a system, then are we not but a step away from unified goals for our educational outcomes? This is assuredly a step toward mandated national curriculum and interstate and interregional tax and financial management revisions... will we not soon be sharing tax resources from region to region as needed to 'equalize' educational opportunities and programs deemed 'exemplary' or in the 'national interest to produce global-minded citizens?'

The longer I thought of "assessment" being the "value determined for tax purposes" and the possibility of cross-regional/state shar-

ing of tax resources, the more concerned I became over the idea that the record-keeping and information-compiling might become so tied to the individual student that "assessment" might have a more malignant potential. We were talking about our children here.

At that point in time there was a growing emphasis on choice and vouchers/tuition tax credits in education. Since with the money flows the control, could this be part of the "assessment" picture? That would tie an individual student moving about in the "choice market" directly to a federal accounting process both financially and educationally due to national standards being proposed. No one seemed to be too worried about it in the 1980's, but it still bothered me.

Over a period of time I shared my concern with close associates — if "assess" was to "assign a value for tax purposes", then why were we "assessing" children? A theory began to take root and grow in my mind: somehow we were going to allow children's potential worth to society to be measured, and their future life roles would somehow be measured, and their future life roles would be somehow projected, and they would be limited by that assigned worth. What a thought! Could this be possible in the United States [of America]?

HUMAN CAPITAL DEFINED

Later someone sent me pages from a book entitled **Human Capital and America's Future**, edited by David W. Hornbeck and Lester M. Salamon. The title itself set off alarm bells because of the connection to education shared by many of the contributors, especially Hornbeck. It was now the early 90's and many disturbing things were happening. David Hornbeck was a highly visible change agent responsible for many radical education reforms in states from Kentucky to Iowa and had been a consultant to many more.

Why was Hornbeck focusing on 'human capital'? That had been primarily used in economic and commercial literature. Hornbeck was also identified with changes in "assessment" in the school systems with which he consulted and worked. The book was published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 1991 and contains an enlightening list of contributors in addition to Hornbeck: Ernest Boyer; Nancy Barrett; Anthony Carnavale; Sheldon Danziger; Marian Wright Edelman; Scott Fosler; Daniel Greenberg; Jason Jaffras; Arnold Packer; Isabel Sawhill; Marion Pines; Donald Stewart, and Lester Salamon.

The social and political views of **Human Capital's** line-up of contributors could be the basis of another whole article, but suffice it to say that most of the radical changes toward a managed populis in this country can be reflected among this group of individuals. Weren't some of them involved in the dis-establishing of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) and turning it into the Department of Education?

While references to "human capital" have been the fare of business publications for some time, it has only been in the last few years that this term applied to school children. In Hornbeck's chapter in **Human Capital**, 'New Paradigm for Action', he outlined the systemic change which must occur to produce the workforce for the future and fulfill our nation's 'human capital' needs. Hornbeck's "new paradigm of action" looked a lot like old "OBE" — setting specific performance standards and invoking penalties for schools, teachers and students not meeting them:

"If the new comprehensive system is to be outcome-based, careful attention must be paid to 'assessment' strategies. The

selection of outcome indicators will be informed by the availability of sound assessment instruments." (emphasis added)

Now here was Hornbeck using "assessment" and "instrument" together instead of a substitute for one or the other — and he had selected the two terms which carried legal usage definitions. Hornbeck asserted that while the NAEP might be universally available, and portfolio "assessments" (notice the use of both words together) would become popular, "the Educational Testing Service (ETS) is investing time and funds in developing new approaches to assessment." He further stated that while most of the present 'assessment' observations are "related to academic objectives"...

"Similar sensitivity is required in carefully defining appropriate assessment tools in other areas as well. In citizenship... a method should be developed for expressing qualitative aspects of participation activities... a different 'value' could be placed on 'community service'... physical and mental fitness... problems arise as we confront legal and even constitutional issues (self-incrimination, search and seizure)... Perhaps a school system should plan to have all students undergo a "physical exam" in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades as a health counterpart to the academic testing program. Again, the emphasis must be on carefully determining assessment strategies that measure the outcomes to be achieved."

All of this is structured because "incremental change is insufficient. Systems must be radically altered to produce what the nation's economy demands in a work force."

Weren't we supposed to be concerned about the education of school children? This sounded a lot like literature which proposed "full employment" policies — much like the billboards and signs plastered on public transportation and public buildings in Grenada — "Work for everyone; everyone working!" — before the U.S. invasion to overthrow their communist government.

Was this why the Council of Chief State School Officers accepted a contract from the National Center for Educational Statistics to develop what is known as the **SPEEDE EXPRESS**? (The Exchange of Permanent Records Electronically of Students and Schools.) This electronic information track can carry the most diverse and extensive information on a student, delivering it to future employers, places of higher education, training centers, health providers (contraceptive histories will be included), the military and a number of other recipients yet to be designated. Then if employers, government and others have input into what should be the outcome of education in this country — instead of education being academically and informational-based — then the concept of "assessment as assigning a value" to a child takes on proportions that are certainly Orwellian.

What if your child's "assessed" worth doesn't meet anyone's projected goal? Proponents of the **Certificate of Initial Mastery (CIM)** and the **Certificate of Advanced Mastery (CAM)** are, in truth, fleshing out the skeleton of assigning a value to a person. Without the CIM/CAM in those states adopting the concept a young person will not be able to apply for a job, drive a car, or do many other things which have never before been predicated on governments' conferring a value on a person's worth to society.

The People's Republic of China, a communist country, uses "no conformity" — "no job" policies to enforce its "one child" policy. Have we understood the direction of these changes? Is this constitutional or moral?

ASSESSING HUMAN VALUE

The next piece to the puzzle of assessment fell into place when my suspicions were confirmed that we really were assessing "value". The August 1993 issue of *Visions*, the newsletter of the Education for the Future Initiative sponsored by Pacific Telesis Foundation, was given out at a legislative committee meeting as part of a packet of information on technology in the classroom and school-to-work transition activities. The lead article was **Beyond the Bubble** with a blurb reading: "Educators are finding that new ways of teaching require new forms of 'assessment'."

On page three there was a column entitled 'Authentic Definitions'. Finally, I thought, I have found an educational publication that will define this word and allay my fears. Sure enough, there was the word:

"Assessment — The act or result of judging the 'worth' or 'value' of something or 'someone'.

The worth or value of something or someone?! This was confirmation that educational testing had taken an extreme left turn. It was not comforting to realize that our children were going to be assigned a value based on "acceptable performance behaviors in life-role applications" as proposed in PacTelesis Foundation's 'Authentic Definitions'.

Knowing that

- 1) Our children would be tracked and that extensively detailed would be electronically compiled and transmitted to select file-users;
- 2) Information would include or be based on a value level assigned to them contingent upon performance — as a child — of life-role competencies;
- 3) Value levels could reflect the scale of achievement outlined in the United States Labor Department's 1993 "Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills" [SCANS] — which encompasses personality traits and private preferences, and
- 4) The purpose of education has documentably been diverted into workforce training, led me ultimately to the conclusion that indeed the future holds a less than bright prospect for our young people. To be formally assigned a "worth" to society based on your ability as a child to demonstrate that you can perform an "essential skill" should be a foreign concept in a constitutional republic like the one in which we live — these United States of America.

An example of how these efforts at "assessment" have been perverted to the ends outlined above is given in **Crucial Issues In Testing**, edited by Ralph W. Tyler and Richard M. Wolf. This book is one in a series prepared under the auspices of the National Society for the Study of Education, which in 1974 included names like William Spady, John Goodlad, and Robert Havighurst on its governing committee.

On page 98, within an article by Carmen J. Finley (of the American Institute for Research) is a section entitled "Defining Goals versus Comparison With an Average:"

"In the National Assessment program specific objectives or goals are defined and exercises are written which determine how well these goals are being met. For example, in citizenship a major objective is to 'Support Rights and Freedoms of

All Individuals.' One specific way in which a person might meet this goal is to defend the right of a person with very unpopular views to express his opinion and support the right of 'extreme' (political or religious) groups to express their views in public."

One exercise which was written to try to tell whether or not this objective was being met is as follows:

"Below are three statements which make some people angry. Mark each statement as to whether you think a person on radio or TV should or should not be allowed to make these statements:

* = Russia is better than the United States.

* = Some races of people are better than others.

* = It is not necessary to believe in God."

This is the goal-oriented approach. The objectives or goals represent a kind of standard which is considered desirable to achieve. The exercises, if they are good measures, tell to what extent the goals are being achieved. This approach tells very specifically what a person knows or can do.

I submit that the goals-oriented/performance-based /OBE/assessment approach just outlined tells more than what a child knows or can do. This approach very specifically reveals what a child feels and believes. Remember that "assessments" measure toward predetermined outcomes. Those outcomes represent the judged "worth" or "value" of your children and mine!

With the last election cycle hope swept the country that a conservative majority had exerted itself; changes would be made. As a country we'd be snatched from the brink of economic socialism and potential corporate fascism; and sanity would be restored to the halls of government. Right?

WHEN RIGHT IS LEFT

It just happens that the October 1992 edition of *Visions* (PacTelesis Foundation newsletter) contained an article entitled "**Why Technology?**" It began,

"Alvin Toffler, the author of such influential books as **Future Shock** and **The Third Wave**, has written that the spread of personal computers is the single most important change in the field of knowledge since the invention of movable type in the 15th century. He goes on to state that knowledge is the key to power in the 21st century — not mineral rights or military force."

This was the same publication that carried the definitive definition of "assessment". And wasn't this the same Alvin Toffler who wrote **Creating A New American Civilization**, which heralds the coming third wave of global culture, published by the Progress and Freedom Foundation and introduced at their 'Cyberspace and the New American Dream' conference in Atlanta last year?

Newt Gingrich, the new Speaker of the House, introduced Toffler as his longtime friend and then sat quietly by to hear Toffler say that national sovereignty was a thing of the past and that he was an avowed secularist. These are the stripes of our new "conservative" future?

At the same Cyberspace conference, an array of professionals from many areas of cultural life paraded their contributions to leadership toward the much-touted **Third Wave**. The spokesperson for

education in Progress and Freedom Foundation's lineup was - and still is - Lewis J. Perelman, author of "**School's Out: A Radical New Formula for the Revitalization of America's Educational System**". Perelman advocates what he calls just-in-time learning, privatized public schools, total quality applications, hyperlearning, and many other catchy concepts which are now, of course, getting much attention in the policy debate.

It should be noted that in the Preface to his book Perelman cites Wassily Leontief and B.F. Skinner among those from whom he particularly benefited during his years at Harvard in the 70's. Most interesting since Leontief is the acknowledged expert on **management by objectives (MBO)** — the forerunner and companion to PPBS. And Skinner was the American father of behavioral psychology, and mastery learning/operant conditioning — the foundation for OBE.

These relationships of Perelman's are important because he supplied the connecting piece to complete the puzzle picture of our children's future. Perelman states on page 316 that. . .

"Nostalgic mythology about 'local control' should not mask the reality that the state governments have the constitutional authority, call the shots, and pay most of the bill for education. But government, local or otherwise, no longer needs to own and operate school systems or academic institutions."

TAXING HUMAN WORTH

Now, to the heart of Perelman's alternative proposal which forms the future of "conservative" educational policy and expresses "assessment's" future use:

"One possibility would be a 'human capital tax'. The human capital tax might be simply the same as a personal income tax, or might be calculated or ear-marked in a more limited way. Technicalities aside, it's logical that if the government is going to help fund investments in the development of the community's human capital, taking back a share of the resulting gains is a good way to pay for it. In effect, each generation of beneficiaries of such investment pays back some of the benefits it received to the next generation" (value-added tax, ed.) (p. 317)

"We should deal with parents who are 'starving their children's minds' with the same legal remedies we use to deal with parents who are starving their children's bodies. The... media through which a microchoice [voucher] system is provided will give public authorities more accurate information on what individual families and kids are doing than is currently available, making it easier to identify instances of negligence or misuse." (page 318 [emphasis added])

"...there's no good reason why the learner should not be able to purchase services or products from any provider — whether public or private, in-state or out-of-state." (p. 319)

A VALUE ADDED TAX FOR HUMAN WORTH

There is the framework. A value-added tax process that will "deduct" from a services/education super-voucher a tax for every level of achievement/skill a student achieves — true 'assessment'. Standards will be rigid and penalties for non-achievement will be enforceable against the student, his parents, and providers of educational services in order to achieve a trained workforce."

The implications for families being disrupted by accusations and prosecutions for Perelman's implied abuse and neglect over "parental starving of children's minds" are startling in their flagrancy. An elaborate and accurate system will track families and students, leaving privacy and confidentiality in the dust. The tax/voucher will follow the student across state and regional boundaries, necessitating a reformulation of tax bases; this could even be extended to foreign sources — Facilitated by choice and charter school initiatives. (Remember Toffler asserts that national sovereignty is or will soon be a thing of the past. And what about GATT's education provision?)

The World Bank has just announced (Associated Press, *The Des Moines Register*, 9/15/95) its new formula for estimating a nation's worth. Ismael Serageldin, World Bank vice president for environmentally sustainable development, stated in '**Monitoring Environmental Progress: A Report on Work in Progress**' that the system "for the first time folds a country's people and its natural resources into its overall balance sheet."

While the World Bank projects that its new system of measuring wealth which "attempts to go beyond traditional gauges" and lists "Human Resources: value represented by people's productive capacity" (e.g. education, nutrition) will take years to perfect, I submit that our process of 'assessment' is a giant step in that direction.

I am reminded that in May of 1984 the *Washington Post* published an article entitled "**Industrial Policy Urged for GOP**." The Institute for Contemporary Studies, "founded by Edwin Meese, Caspar Weinberger and other Reagan Supporters", issued a report that advocated "Republicans shed some of their deep-rooted antipathy to a planned economy." All signals seem to point to the fact that this has indeed happened.

Somewhere in all of this is lost the ability to communicate our culture in an organized way and to teach basic skills that can be used whether cyberspace technology is available or not. Didn't we used to call this "education"? Didn't we believe that our children had some choice in their futures?

When is 'assessment' really 'assessment'? Ernest Boyer, former Director of the Office of Education and Carnegie Foundation director, once said, "To be fully human one must serve

In the future to be fully assessed may mean our Children's worth as a "servant" of the state will be "assigned a value for tax purposes."

America, where are you?