

“Best and Worst” of Assessment Tools

Being that assessments and evaluations are requirements of the education world, it is always a good idea to analyze the types of assessments that are commonly used. This week, I took the opportunity investigate some of the required assessments that are used at my middle school. I also took a look at the assessments that I like to use for my own classroom that are not considered requirements. I found some that are similar and some that are quite different. For this particular assignment, I chose to focus on some of my discoveries on the assessments that are similar. Two of them are required for the school, and two of them I use in my classroom.

For starters, each of these assessments have a technological component. By using technology tools, there are some bonuses to them instead of using traditional assessments. The first two I investigated are both a computer generated test known as Scantron. At my middle school, it is a requirement for the math and language arts teachers to formally assess their students with Scantron. Although this assessment is the same technological tool, each test is completely different. Being that Scantron has so many different components, I decided to look at the best and the worst of Scantron for Math and English.

When it comes to the terminology of Scantron, there are two forms. One is a paper and pencil form that uses a machine to grade the test. The second is a known as Scantron Performance Series. This form uses web-based diagnostics. The best way to describe Scantron Performance Series is from their own definition:

“Performance Series is a standards-based assessment that uses an innovative computer-adaptive, internet model to target the instructional level of each student.”
(<http://www.scantron.com/performanceseries/howitworks.aspx>, 13, April, 2012.)

This particular assessment will generate questions and adjust to each individual's difficulty level based on previous answers. For instance, if the student is able to answer the easier questions quickly, then Performance Series will start to generate more difficult leveled questions will challenge that student. If a student struggles with easier questions, then the test will generate questions that are more for lower levels. The beauty about this assessment is the fact that it can provide accurate evaluations of each student's abilities.

Each test takes approximately one hour. Once the student completes the test, the results are immediately available online. Scantron Performance Series has a variety of reports that can be accessed by the student, parents, teacher, school, and district. For instance, each student can look at his or her student summary and see how well he or she performed. The teacher is able to see the same student summary report, but they also have the ability to create class data sheets and rank students based on abilities. These type of reports allow teachers to provide immediate feedback for each student as well as look at create differentiated groupings for the class. In addition to the summary reports, this type of program creates a digital record of each student's results for future teachers to look at for background knowledge.

Another feature of this technological assessment is its reliability. Due to the fact that this assessment is norm/criterion referenced, each student that takes the test is compared to a national ranking. This allows the teachers, school, and district visualize how well the students are performing standards-based skills as well as compare them to other students within the district, state, and nation.

Although there are some unique and wonderful features to this assessment, there are few set backs. For starters, many educators that are required to give students this assessment have the lack of knowledge and confidence to utilize the data the assessment generates. For instance, our entire district has been using this assessment for each school's Math Department for quite some time. Our Language Arts Department is the first to use it in the district. Being that Math has used this for so long, they are able to utilize the data with purpose! I was able to meet with our middle school's math coach. She was able to show me exactly how the math teachers are able to interpret the data, use the data to create differentiated instructions, provide interventions for students with "hole," and communicate the data to each student's math teacher for the following school year. Our math coach also takes the opportunity to meet with the math coaches at the elementary level to show them what isn't being taught and meet with the math coach at the high school to learn the expectations for the middle school level. This type of vertical and horizontal alignment makes this type of assessment very meaningful and purposeful.

The Language Arts Department isn't able to utilize the data like math. Since this is the first year they have used the assessment, they are just now able to visualize data at different parts of the school year instead of at the end of year with TCAP scores. I was able to sit down with the literacy coach, and she was able to tell me that she has "high hopes" for the way they will utilize data from this assessment. This year, they just wanted to get comfortable with it and

possibly evaluate teachers' instruction. It has been an "eye opener" to many of the teachers in the Language Arts Department, and next year will be telling. However, currently, this assessment is not being utilized as meaningful or purposeful as it does in math.

The final setback to this assessment is the inability to test each content area. Currently offered for reading, writing, math, and life science only. Being that I'm a life science teacher, I have the ability to use this assessment, but chose not to because of the expense. This assessment costs five dollars per student. Within my middle school, we have approximately three hundred and thirty seventh graders taking life science. So, we would have to waste the majority of my science budget on this assessment. If we used that money for this assessment, we would be unable to provide my students with materials for labs, specimens for dissections, and things that provide our students with hands-on and real -life experiences. It is important to keep a balance. We still want to provide our students with technology and abilities to master 21st Century Skills, but we also have to balance our budget to provide a variety of these opportunities. Due to the expense of this test, that is not possible.

So, since I have to spend the science budget on supplies, I rely on other assessments with a technological component. Two programs that I have found to be great resources are Quia and Quizlet. Both can be used for formal and informal assessments. I have used them for both, but for this paper, I will focus on their informal assessments.

Quia stands for Quintessential Instructional Archive. This particular program allows students to access a variety of review game activities, surveys, and/or quizzes that I have created. In addition, I am, as the teacher, able to access other teachers' quia activities, surveys and/or quizzes to share with my students. One of the best components to this site is the ability to track student's time spent on activities. For instances, I'm able to see how much time a student spent practicing the activities as well as his or her results. Based on the activity, it can be used to formally or informally assess students. The majority of the activities are designed to be standards-based, or you can create them to be so, which allows teachers to evaluate students' knowledge of the content and skills. Quia also provides the students with instant feedback on scores as well as send me the results. This allows me to have conversations with students that are struggling or congratulate those that are successful. If I was to use this program for formal assessments, I'm able to pull reports that summarize how well the students did on each question. This can definitely be useful when it comes to evaluating my teaching instruction. This particular program has lots to offer educators of 21st Century Learners. There are many great components to this technology tool especially when it comes to assessments

and evaluations.

Quizlet is a little less innovative than Quia. However, there is one big difference between Quia and Quizlet, Quizlet is free! This particular website is designed to help students study for assessments. Students or teachers are able to create flashcards that may be beneficial to study for the formal assessments. In addition to the flashcards, there are opportunities for review games and teachers can use it to create multiple choice tests. The best aspect of this program is the fact that students can design the cards to fit his or her learning styles. For instance, visual learners can download videos/pictures to his or her cards while auditory learners can download audio clues to his or her cards. Quizlet is also linked to Facebook, so it makes it easy and motivating for students to study within his or her social network. Teachers can also create groups of students and be able to monitor the amount the flashcards are used. This will provides teachers with authentic assessments as to how much time students studied.

Overall, both Quia and Quizlet have some great resources for educators to evaluate students informally. There are a few setbacks. For instance Quia does require a subscription of forty-nine dollars. If districts do not pay for this program, many teachers spend his or her own money. However, if schools are able to collaborate and get ten or more teachers to subscribe, then there is a discount. Quizlet is free, but in order to get access to all the program has to offer, that requires a subscription of fifteen dollars. For many teachers, money is tight, but I really do think it is worth it to purchase one of these programs.

In my opinion, using Quia and Quizlet, has made my job, as a teacher, so much easier. I'm able to get immediate feedback on each of my students, use less paper, and create ways to keep my students engaged and motivated to learn. These two programs jumpstarted my ability to be classified as a 21st Century teacher! Of course, there is other programs that provide just as many opportunities, but I highly recommend Quia and Quizlet. As for Scantron, I think it is a wonderful assessment program and has great potential, but time will tell if we use it in science.

Resources:

Scantron performance series. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.scantron.com/performanceseries/>

Quia. (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.quia.com>

Quizlet (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.quizlet.com>