Classroom Assessment in Action

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We write this book review having recently selected a new textbook for the undergraduate, measurement for teachers course at our institution. In the process of selecting a new course text, we reviewed over a dozen books on classroom assessment theory and practice aimed at beginning teachers. The majority of these textbooks addressed the same content and in similar sequence. Typically, these books had links to case studies, teacher resources, and formative assessment activities, all intended to guide teaching and learning. At just over 500 pages, *Classroom Assessment in Action* addresses many of the same topics presented in other assessment textbooks but in sufficiently more depth. In addition, Shermis and Di Vesta's text provides a chapter on technology in assessment (Chapter 9), best practices in assessment (Chapter 15), and on selecting standardized tests (Chapter 8), topics that are minimally covered in other books on classroom assessment but that are critical to assessment in schools and districts today. In alignment with other textbooks, *Classroom Assessment in Action* features 'theory to practice' sidebars throughout chapters that elucidate connections between assessment concepts and classroom implementation as well as teaching and learning resources including PowerPoint presentations, a test bank, and student web resources (upon request from the publisher). Overall, *Classroom Assessment in Action* provides a thorough text on key concepts for measurement in contemporary schooling and serves well its purpose to

> create a text that provided a strong rationale for integrating assessment and instruction into a functional process, one that offered concrete guidelines on how to construct various common assessments, a set of procedures to evaluate and improve assessments once they were constructed, and a discussion of the factors that might impact test score interpretation. (pp. IX-X)

Classroom Assessment in Action opens with an introductory chapter that sets the stage for assessment in education with an emphasis on the multiple uses and purposes of assessment in schools. Within this chapter, Shermis and Di Vesta describe the multiple educational stakeholders involved in assessment processes and the primary users of assessment information. This multiple-perspective framework is a useful basis for getting teacher candidates thinking about the extent to which assessments impact decision-making at various levels of the educational system. Moreover, understanding these perspectives is critical to the daily work of teachers and to interpreting assessment results in valid ways. As such, we think that there may have been value in more forcefully maintaining this multiple-perspective framework throughout subsequent chapters of the

text as a heuristic for understanding the gamut of influences shaping the assessment of students' learning and achievement.

Specifically, in their introductory chapter Shermis and Di Vesta identify and describe how assessments are used by teachers, students, parents, administrators, the public, and policy makers to make judgments and decisions based on assessment information. One aspect that was largely missing from their initial description of stakeholders was the role of students in constructing and utilizing assessment information to support their own learning, although this was briefly addressed in later sections of the text. We believe that this is one of the most critical functions of assessment in education as reflected by contemporary *Assessment for Learning* (AFL) approaches (i.e., Black & Wiliam, 1998; Earl, 2003; Stiggins, 2001). Although Shermis and Di Vesta mention AFL toward the end of their introductory chapter, their treatment of this issue is reduced to a "rephrasing" of earlier conceptions of assessment (i.e., formative assessment) rather than an expansion of earlier conceptions that moves assessment from teacher-centered to student-driven.

The remaining chapters of the book move into describing specific assessment processes and constructs relevant to teachers' assessment practices. Chapters 2-13 address theory and concepts of assessment, from planning assessments through interpretation and communication of assessment results. Chapter 2: *Planning Assessments* introduces several concepts including criterion-referenced and norm-referenced assessments, behavioral objectives, one version of Bloom's Taxonomy, and the useful table of specifications process to assessment planning (referred to as test blueprints or blueprint specifications). We believe that these are all essential foundational concepts for beginning and established teachers to know in order to effectively plan assessments of student learning. We were curious however about the authors' justification for using a five-level version of Bloom's Taxonomy, appearing to consolidate the synthesis and evaluation levels, and their rationale for presenting Bloom's in a non-traditional hierarchical manner. Further explanation of Bloom's taxonomy, particularly at higher levels, may have been useful for readers and for planning performance assessment tasks.

Considering the critical role of formative assessment in guiding classroom instruction (i.e., Brimijoin, Marquissee, & Tomlinson, 2003; Earl, 2003; Tomlinson, 2007), we were pleased to see the full chapter devoted to formative assessment (Chapter 4) and a chapter exclusively addressing observations (Chapter 3) as one method of formative assessment. We found it interesting how the authors defined observations as "a basic tool in assessment" rather than as a method or process of assessment that is ongoing within teaching and learning. In addition, within their definition of observational assessment, the authors included the evaluation of products, describing this as an indirect observation. While various methods of formal observations were described in detail, we would have liked more information about less structured observation practices (i.e., observation of students' verbal and nonverbal indicators), because these observations play a major role in classroom decisions, understanding assessment score validity, and contextualizing assessment decisions.

Keeping in alignment with other pre-service assessment textbooks, Chapters 5 through 7 provide technical instruction for creating various test and assessment formats, representing what are considered the 'best practices' for developing classroom assessment. Specifically, Chapter 5 addressed performance assessments and portfolio assessment, Chapter 6 described considerations when creating objective tests, and Chapter 7 covered the development of open-ended test items. Rubrics were discussed in two chapters: Chapters 5 and 7. Across these chapters, information and guidelines for assessment construction were presented in a clear and logical sequence that we feel would be accessible for beginning and practicing teachers.

Although Chapter 8 covered a topic that is characteristic of most classroom assessment textbooks, standardized assessments, the authors of this book took a different approach. This chapter emphasized the process of standardized test selection. Although this is a necessary consideration for policymakers and district assessment coordinators, this information may be less relevant to teacher candidates, because they are not typically involved in the selection process of standardized assessments. More relevant information for beginning teachers would have been to explain how to administer standardized assessments as well as how to interpret and communicate these standardized test results to students, parents, and administrators. In our experience with educating pre-service teacher candidates, interpreting and communicating standardized test results is one of the areas where teacher candidates feel most unprepared and which typically results in them dismissing the value of standardized assessment information. Accordingly, we believe that presenting a framework for understanding various standardized assessment reports is a useful and necessary component for pre-service assessment textbooks.

We agree with the authors' decision to include a chapter on *Technology in Assessment* (Chapter 9), as technology is currently one of the most significant tools shaping teachers' assessment practices. In this chapter, the authors described some resources available for classroom instruction and assessment, giving examples of specific software products. However, we noticed that the references in this chapter were slightly dated and considering the fast-paced changes in technology, more recent resources would have been beneficial. Further, one area of technology in assessment that we felt could have been more explicitly addressed was organizational and grades software resources (i.e., electronic gradebook/spreadsheet, security systems, and software for creating class websites). For the majority of teachers, organizational and grades software are among the most common technologies used in relation to student assessment at a classroom level.

Chapter 10 describes methods for analyzing test results with specific directions on how to conduct test and item analyses. Regarding the analysis of students' performance on tests, the concept of mastery analysis was also discussed. Judging the quality of instruction and examining test error are critical processes for teachers to consider and integrate into their teaching and response to assessments. In our reading of this chapter, we found the information straightforward and direct; however, more emphasis could have been placed on the value and limitations of descriptive indicators such as measures of central tendency, as these are most readily calculated by teachers in judging class performance on assessment.

In breaking from the typical chapter sequence found in other classroom assessment textbooks, Shermis and Di Vesta's text saves discussions related to the political and policy context of assessment in schools and discussions on assessment fairness, reliability, and validity to the last two chapters of the book. Typically, these topics are presented early on in textbooks to provide a policy context for assessment in schools as well as presentation of foundational constructs to assessment. We find that providing students with these concepts early in their learning helps to situate assessment approaches and philosophies and more fully interrogate assessment practices for aspects of fairness, reliability, and validity. As such, we wonder why the authors of this text elected to save these topics as a conclusion rather than beginning their text with them.

In conclusion, Shermis and Di Vesta's text, *Classroom Assessment in Action*, is an effective resource for supporting educational stakeholders in understanding multiple perspectives and issues related to contemporary student assessment. Although Shermis and Di Vesta acknowledge teacher candidates as the primary audience for this text, we question whether or not this text is best intended for the novice educator, given its length and depth of coverage. Instead, we see great value in its use with more experienced educators, administrators, district assessment coordinators, and graduate students. Accordingly, we recommend that this book be considered for higher-level studies in assessment and for those with an interest in more advanced learning about measurement in schools.

References

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