Developing Assessments for Learning That Lead to Equity

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Most educators recognize that standardized tests are insufficient for knowing how to improve student performance and teaching practice. They are best used as a mechanism for comparing and sorting students. What **other types of assessments** could help improve student performance and teaching practice and become a lever for achieving educational equity?

Assessments for (rather than of) learning

One way that assessment can become a lever for equity is by fundamentally shifting the purpose of assessment from comparing and sorting students to supporting deeper learning. Deeper learning goes beyond having basic content knowledge and foundational skills in reading and mathematics. Deep knowledge means knowing how to handle assignments or tasks that do not have one right answer, knowing how to raise pertinent questions, gather additional information, reason with evidence and, ultimately make judgments in complex and dynamic situations.

Student internships are one way to provide students with authentic opportunities to engage in learning experiences that can develop deeper knowledge. Additionally, internships support teachers' capacities to know their students well and improve the learning opportunities they enact with their students.

Del Lago Academy created a competency-based system of assessments

At Del Lago Academy of Applied Sciences (DLA), students experience deeper learning. They do so through their coursework and through their participation in a carefully constructed and assessed six-week internship. DLA is a small public high school in Escondido, Calif., with a deep commitment to education as a lever for equity. The school educates a diverse group of scholars. Half its student body qualifies for free and reduced-price lunch, and 70 percent of DLA students are nonwhite. The school's goal is to develop its students' **industry-specific skills** and expand their social networks and access to opportunities so that they can succeed in both higher education and in careers of their choosing. There is evidence that they succeed in doing so. According to the state's School Accountability Report Card, 95 percent of DLA students completed the state's high school graduation requirements, compared with 88 percent of students in the district and 87 percent in the state. While there is still room for improvement, educators at DLA attribute their students' success thus far to the school's competency-based approach to education and to the school's overall culture of achievement, which emphasizes the importance of peer-to-peer and peer-to-adult relationships and teaching students to believe that it is "never too late to learn."

DLA has set out to develop a program of study for its students to provide them with knowledge and skills to succeed in STEM jobs and simultaneously develop a demand within the regional STEM industry for DLA students. In pursuit of its mission, DLA developed **Competency X**, which is "an assessment approach for workforce-informed performance tasks." Its approach to assessment emphasizes **assessment for learning**, rather than a traditional approach to assessment of learning. DLA views Competency X as a way "to broaden access to college and career opportunities" for its students in the life sciences. DLA's big idea is that digital badges, which focus on biotechnology knowledge and skills and personal effectiveness, are co-created with industry and college partners to measure students' attainment of specific industry knowledge and skills. The vision is for students to use their earned badges as a type of currency to gain access to internships and/or to earn college credit.

Students co-create digital badges and learn to direct their learning outside of school, too

The co-creation of badges occurs as part of the 11th grade internship program in which all students participate. In their six-week internships, students have responsibility for formulating what they are going to learn through conversations with their internship site mentor. Part of this conversation entails a discussion about what the student will do during the internship to learn those skills and to demonstrate their learning. Each student is positioned in his/her internship to direct aspects of his/her learning and be held responsible for learning something important in a particular field. This expectation and accompanying processes teach students how to advocate effectively for their needs in a work setting. Through this experience, students come to see why learning particular knowledge or skills matters for specific jobs in the biotech industry.

Internships can challenge opportunities for equity

In independent, out-of-school learning environments, such as internships, students may confront a variety of inequities that stem from biased institutional structures and/or an under-representation of people in the workplace of different socioeconomic classes, races, and/or genders.

This reality was encapsulated by the experience of one DLA students, who we call Claudia. Claudia is a student of color and did her internship at a biotechnology lab. She conducted experiments alongside her white male mentor. She got to do everything he did, which she appreciated. What surprised her though was, "No one in the laboratory looked like me—except the receptionist!" Commenting on Claudia's experience, an internship adviser said that students' exposure to inequities in the workplace "happens with enough frequency that we've all noticed it. ...." This internship adviser elaborated, "For some students, ...[experiences like Claudia's] develop a great sense of urgency to move toward equity. For other scholars, it's been intimidating, and [then] it's been a lot of work to get scholars to remain committed to their initial goals of being in those fields."

The reality that students come face-to-face with society's inequities when they participate in internships necessitates that schools help prepare students for, and support them through, these experiences. Students need to receive the knowledge and skills that they require to confront or respond to these inequities in ways that do not cause them harm. Helping students to be able to respond to these workplace and societal inequities in productive ways, which do not deter them from pursuing their learning interests and goals, is enormously challenging for a school to undertake—and goes well beyond merely providing all students with access to workplace opportunities in various fields and industries.

Such quality learning opportunities require that teachers be sensitive to how students from different backgrounds, communities, and experiences respond to these opportunities. Teachers, especially those of a different race and socioeconomic background than their students, will need to remain alert to their own unconscious biases about what they believe is in their students' best interests as well as be attuned to what students perceive is in their best interests. Issues of equity, privilege, and status will need to be considered—from multiple perspectives and vantage points—and revisited often. Teachers will also need to look for evidence that shows how well their efforts to enable students to advance their own learning are actually working and to what ends.

Tags: assessment internships SCOPE