Climbing Back into a Canoe in Deep Water

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Abstract

Academic measurement, including formative and summative testing, but especially standardized testing, in public schools is often considered the acid test of students’ skill development by provincial educational governing bodies. Standardized test results are often used to gage teacher and school effectiveness too, as well as inform data-driven curriculum decisions at a strategic level. Their impacts are far reaching for students, teachers, and education in general. While skill development is very important, life experience has a way of teaching us that no amount of skill is going to be enough in some situations. Some degree of failure is inevitable and some degree of creative problem solving will be necessary to deal with the failures. Learning how to recover from failure situations and testing for such recovery seems to me to be at least as worthy a pursuit of education assessment as success-path skills development and its assessment. This paper recalls a recovery assessment from my youth and demonstrates how this kind of testing is missing from the repertoire of school assessments that one usually thinks of. Using critical theory, I look at classroom and standardized assessment for what else is missing. I identify many skills schools never seem to test and ask why from a critical perspective. I suggest critical and ethical ways teachers might counter the negative effects of what is missing from academic assessments.

Keywords: Academic assessments, formative assessment, summative assessment, recovery assessment, critical theory, youth

Introduction

As a girl of ten, or so, I stayed with a friend and her parents at a water-side cabin in Ontario. My friend and I wanted to take the canoe out by ourselves to a place up-river, so we asked permission. The dad said yes, but first we had to show him that we could get back into an overturned canoe in deep water over our heads. Even as ten-year-old girls, we thought that was a reasonable condition, given there might not be any adults around if we accidently tipped over the canoe and fell in the water. We already knew we were reasonably skilled canoers, having practiced a lot close to shore or with adults, so we thought proving ourselves would be a simple matter and that we would be out paddling by ourselves in no time. What we didn’t know was how difficult the challenge would be. And not just for ten-year-olds! It is a difficult, if not near impossible task. We tried for a couple of days, to no avail. We decided to tell the dad we had “almost” done it and asked if we could please go anyway. Without giving us an answer, he only increased the challenge by adding paddles to the mix. Not only would we have to right the canoe

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1 This article is deliberately written as a narrative (a series of stories), which explicitly includes personal lived experiences. Further, the article adopts critical pedagogy, social justice, and posthumanism theory perspectives.
in deep water and get in, but we would also have to make sure we didn’t loose the paddles to the moving current. Long story short, we never managed to right the canoe in deep water, let alone climb back in, however, we did hang on to the paddles and came up with an alternate canoe righting strategy. We swam the canoe to shore, turned it over, and climbed in, paddles and all. After that demonstration, we were given permission to go some distance up-river, but we continued to stay close to the shore. In truth, the one time we rounded the point out of sight of the cabin, we felt so nervous, we turned back.

While the lessons we learned and the teaching pedagogy used are rather transparent, what might not be so obvious is what this story might teach us about assessment. Unlike typical school assessments, where the desired skill, for example, multiplication, is measured for positive results, my friend’s dad was not positively measuring our canoeing skills, he was measuring our ability to cope with situations when our canoeing skills would fail us. He realized, although we didn’t at the time, that “stuff happens” and that sometimes no amount of skill is going to be enough. I call his measurement strategy recovery assessment, a term I borrow from large organizations, including governments and corporations, who actively plan for disaster recovery (Finucane et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2017). Many telephony or network-based organizations test those plans using real-time drills or computer simulations. However, at its simplest level, we are all familiar with the fire drill, a public version of this kind of recovery thinking, planning, and testing. First aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) training are two other common examples that involve recovery thinking, planning, and testing.

That said, I’ve only ever seen recovery strategy thinking employed by a school teacher once, but not in a school setting. My son who was scheduled to compete as a pianist in the Kiwanis Music Festival (a regional music competition conducted simultaneously in multiple locations Canada-wide), dislocated his ring finger two weeks before the competition in a school skiing accident. I called the music teacher to let her know and asked for instructions on how to withdraw him from the event given the late date. She would not hear of it. Instead, she asked to see him that day and began teaching him alternate fingering adapted for his injury. Of course, I was grateful for her creativity, but surprised too, because she had impressed me as someone who didn’t like to break rules. Typically, she was strict and a stickler for following musical notation and correct form. However, she not only taught us a valuable lesson in persistence, but she also taught me, and I think my son too, that when “stuff happens”, conventional skills are not enough; recovery skills are needed, ironically, even in testing situations. Two weeks later my son competed, played with the alternate fingerings, and a little clicking from the metal medical finger brace he had to wear. Out of the hundreds of competitors in his group, he won first place in all his competitions.

The point of telling these stories is two-fold. The first is to suggest that what we commonly think of as typical school assessment, formative, summative, and standardized, has serious limitations because it is missing some key parts such as testing what to do when things go wrong. The second is to suggest that an examination of those missing parts, tells us something about the values and ethics embedded in the tests and curriculums we use as teachers. Much of this paper looks at these missing parts for critical exclusions; exclusions that matter to the ones being assessed.
Critical Exclusions

Every test, as with individual tasks in school and in life, must exclude more than it includes. It goes without saying, so why, you might ask, am I focusing on exclusions here? Unlike some exclusions, critical exclusions address ethical and constitutive concerns and involve a deconstructive process of analysis; they do not employ critique perse. As Barad (2012) puts it, “critique is all too often not a deconstructive practice, that is, a practice of reading for the constitutive exclusions of those ideas we cannot do without” (n.p.). So, what are the ideas that have been excluded from school assessment that we cannot do without? And why have they been excluded?

Who’s Missing, What’s Missing

As with any critical undertaking, one must ask who or what is not being considered, then ask how, why, and when it happens. Children and youth have little say in the education they get, and they have no say in the standardized tests administered to them, thus, the missing “who” in standardized assessments is clearly the children and youth themselves (Murris, 2016). That said, they don’t have to be missing from classroom assessments if the teacher decides to include them.

Respect, Permission, Agency, and Power

Including children and youth in their own assessments begins with an appreciation for child agency, so I begin here. While my doctoral thesis was focused on the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions’ Calls to Action 63.3 (2015) through story-making, the story that four Grade 5 and Grade 6 youth created was one about student agency at school (Lee, 2022). Not only was their story about their agency in making decisions that concerned them, but it was also about an educational system that did not foster student decision-making or educate for it. It was, in their view, a system based on respect for authority, instead of just plain ordinary respect that should include them. They came to this view based on interactions they had with an older Indigenous woman that I called Annie in my thesis.

Participants consulted Annie regarding a story decision they had to make that involved an element of potential danger for their story characters. Annie, instead of giving them a straight yes-no, do it or don’t do it, answer to their question, refused to give them an answer. She explained that because she was not responsible for the story or its decisions, that it wouldn’t be right for her to answer their question. She encouraged the children to ask her other questions that might help them to make the decision for themselves. It was clear that she felt that a child who is held accountable for their decisions is more careful in making them. Not only this, encouraging children to make their own decisions demonstrates adults’ respect for a child’s personhood, and engenders and supports their agency. Of course, a child whose agency is respected and who does not expect to be told what to do, will often reach out to others, including parents, siblings, and grandparents, to ask for advice because in the end they would rather their decision be a good one than a bad one. In Annie’s world, children are encouraged to think of potential consequences and develop continuities before making their decision in case the decision they make proves to be a wrong one. In this way, a child is trained to consider the impact of their actions and engage with those potential outcomes before a decision is made thus developing forethought skills. Ultimately, a child educated this way gets ample practice making responsible and informed decisions before becoming an adult. In the case of making a bad decision, the child gets practice evaluating the
negative outcome in conjunction with their conscious acts of forethought. This play between forethought as planned action and actual results becomes a feedback mechanism for further actions similar in nature. One might call this self-reflective thought, where one tells oneself, “I won’t do that again” a form of recovery self-assessment.

At one point, Annie said,

YOU have to think. And not because I don’t want to give you a definite answer [to the question, should the characters go to the basement on their own] but I think you have to question yourself. What would be the consequences, right? ‘Cause for me it’s always about consequences. (Lee, 2022, p. 122)

What I liked about what Annie said about accountability and consequences as well as other things, were the critical implications. Instead of children and youth being told what to do and how to think by authority figures, her form of Indigenous education eliminated the need for authority figures and all the processes that go with it. She relied on children’s natural curiosity and natural awareness of their inexperience to drive them to seek out advice and carefully consider. Annie’s way also reversed the flow of power and critically enabled youth to exercise their own agency that we, as adults and teachers, so often take from them.

From a child agency perspective, assessment takes on a different shape (Murris, 2016). It suggests that as a minimum, school-aged children and youth should be asked for their permission to be assessed, especially for a standardized exam. More importantly though, it suggests that children and youth can and should be encouraged to evaluate themselves. Teachers can help students meet their students’ achievement goals in any number of ways once the student tells them what they are and where they need help. A teacher can present options, facilitate learning encounters, offer suggestions if asked to, but, in terms of active assessment intervention, a teacher’s role might be more of an administrative one, than anything else. For example, a teacher must be the one to ensure that a student’s self-assessment is a conscious act of analysis. The teacher must also ensure that such assessments happen regularly, frequently, and that they are recorded/documentated. Like many adults, children and youth can sometimes be hard on themselves and fail to see the real progress they have made towards their learning and achievement goals. The written record helps to demonstrate the progress made to the student on these occasions, or to parents and school authorities. At no time during this kind of student self-assessment process does a student relinquish their personal agency in the service of goals not of their making.

Note: I was first introduced to this idea through a course at the University of Ottawa, EDU 8253, Cognitive Perspectives on Learning, given by Dr. Barbara Graves in the Winter 2016. She spoke once about a multi-grade classroom she worked in during her own training, where the highly organized teacher conducted regular and discrete student assessments but also included student assessments in her official record.

In keeping with respect for her students’ agency, a teacher might consider allowing her students to determine if an external assessment is needed. By this I mean, an assessment conducted by someone other than the student. If the student determines one is necessary and wanted, the teacher might consider allowing the student to decide when the assessment takes place because in some Indigenous cultures, according to Preston and Claypool (2021), “it is
considered disrespectful to attempt a task before one can perform it relatively well” (p. 8). It is cultural relevant that a teacher respects students’ individual self-assessment of their readiness for an external assessment.

**Dominant Culture Bias**

While many students in Canada live and can operate in multiple cultures of which the white colonial-informed culture is but one, some teachers belong to this dominant culture exclusively. For them, cultural norms, other than their own, may not be known and thus they might use assessment tools and strategies that work at cross-purposes with the student’s preferred cultural norms. Shepard (2019), suggests that a shared and horizontally coherent model of learning for classrooms is necessary to integrate and support “culturally relevant pedagogy” and its associated assessment (p. 185). While she stresses the need for equity goals in this model, it seems to me that her model is very much informed by Euro-American research, values, and standards and does not adequately account for the model’s inherent cultural bias.

Assessments instruments, such as standardized tests, that are known to have a dominant culture bias are clearly unsuitable to measure the abilities of students’ whose culture is not the dominant one (Preston & Claypool, 2021). Some, like me, would argue that they are not even suitable for students brought up in the dominant culture because they measure such a narrow band of what is taught in the classroom, and what is considered meaningful in day-to-day adult life. More on standardized testing, later.

**Individual and Collective Assessments**

Students may want to engage in collective educational goals such as the collective and collaborative story-making task that was at the center of my doctoral work. In such cases, conventional classroom assessment tools that are geared to render individual assessment even from group activities, are ill-equipped to do so. I should note that the kind of collective activities I mean are not the same thing as students wanting to work together on a group project where the tasks are distributed but remain individual contributions to a group endeavor. In such group projects, assessment might take the form of multiple or 360 degree feedback by the teacher, other group members, or the class assessing the value of an individual’s contribution (Bong & Park, 2020). Even though this kind of peer assessment runs the risk of becoming a popularity contest, it is still individual assessment of an individual’s contribution; it is a not collective assessment of a single collective undertaking. I maintain that when an individual is assessed, the assessment must be conducted by the student doing the work, no one else (Yan, 2022).

However, when students are asked to engage in a single collective task or to produce a single artifact, like a story, together, the thing produced is greater than the sum of its parts because it involves synergy, cooperation, collaboration, and trust (Lee, 2022). Collaborative story-making, like stage improv or improvisational music-making such as jazz, involves attentive and acute listening skills that invite a response from one or more others to produce an unscripted verbal or musical dialogue. Something more than individualized learning is happening in these collective activities (Manning, 2012; Mazzei & Jackson, 2017). We also see the same thing on a football (soccer) pitch when players anticipate and dynamically respond to plays by other members of the team in such a way that they make the impossible look effortless. Such learning is felt, is relational, and is so collaborative that the “thing” produced could not have come into being except
by these people, in this place, at this time, engaged in this activity. Some call this art (MacDonald & Wiens, 2019; Manning & Massumi, 2014). And, although I have not experienced it personally, I am told that this phenomenon happens in engineering and architecture too (DeLanda, 2015). Latour (1996, 2005, 2013) suggests that it happens at micro and macros levels all the time as we interact with bacteria, plants, landscapes, solar bodies, and much more.

This said, the question is how might one assess such collective engagements or collective artifacts? What assessment methods can be used when self-assessment is just one element of something with much greater scope and impact? If one can’t assess these phenomena, do collective activities that engage with synergy and perhaps enrich the spirit have a place in schools? My answer to this last question is “Yes.” I would suggest that just because assessment might be difficult or impossible around such activities, teachers should not avoid them in classrooms, but rather work with students to find ways of assessing them if required, perhaps through a posthumanist lens (Barad, 2012; Bozalek et al., 2016).

Related to collective, collaborative works and their assessment, but also related to an educational orientation towards individual achievement, is a refusal on the part of educational assessment to accept that not knowing the answer but knowing where to find it is almost as good as knowing it. If knowing the answer is an A+, then in my view, knowing where to find the answer then getting it is at least an A. As adults, we rely on this method of information retrieval and the expertise of others constantly. We never require ourselves to have detailed information that we use infrequently at our memory fingertips. It seems to me that by placing this memory burden on our students, we are imposing a double standard and one we would never expect of an adult.

With this in mind, I return once again to an idea of recovery assessment. So, what do we teach our students to do when he/she/they can’t remember something or if what they know doesn’t seem to be working? In the same way that Shepard (2019 quoting Sawyer, 2006, p. 4) argues for the deep learning that happens when teaching follows the “‘everyday activities of professionals who work in a discipline’ … rather than involving generic reasoning abilities” I too argue that we should teach ordinary adult practices to our students for recovering a forgotten item from memory (p. 186). Adults, might call someone who is sure to have the bit of info needed, send an email to a colleague, google it, or look it up in an online article or paper book. Technology allows for it, so why isn’t it allowed for in this way in school assessments. Accessing technology or the expertise of community members during testing situations also seems to be a significant missing element of assessment in a digital age. The better and more relevant assessment question for me has to do with how one evaluates and resolves the conflicting information that one might find.

I suggest that rather than critiquing a student’s knowledge gap, that we, as educators, recognize that inter-dependency and relying on others as specific knowledge keepers is one of “those ideas we cannot do without” (Barad, 2012, n.p.). Yet, our formal assessment systems are so focused on the individual that they exclude the critical relevance and store of collective and community knowledge. It is my view that community knowledge is a body of localized information, to which members of the community are entitled access and that this access extends to non-adult students too.
Critical Assessment Pedagogy Today for Tomorrow

While the critical and collective aspects of assessment serve to illustrate the grave limitations inherent in classroom and especially standardized assessment as they are today, we would only be kidding ourselves, if we thought that our arguments or protestations would change the assessment practices in schools and educational systems any time soon. However, what would happen in 30 years or so, if today we began teaching our students to look critically at assessment practices employed by educational bodies. What would happen longitudinally if instead of accepting what authorities say about standardized testing being impartial and necessary, we help our students appreciate that they are not.

We could, for example, begin by asking students what is missing from the standardized assessments they are forced to take. In Ontario, for example, students are tested in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 for math and language literacy. In Quebec, students are tested in years 4 and 6 of primary school and years 2, 4, and 5 of secondary school on a range of topics including French literacy and Quebec history. Even if students consider standardized tests to be valuable and valid, a superficial look at them lets students identify substantive missing subject/discipline areas.

If asked, many students would be able to name some of the missing subjects as drawing, musical performance, drama, sports, and material construction among other skills. A logical follow-up question is to ask why are they missing? A logical answer a teacher might get is that the testers don’t think those missing skills are as important as the math and literacy skills that are tested. A teacher might then ask, “Who are these testers?” This might lead to an identification of school authority figures or educational power centers. Following this line of thinking is likely to culminate in students understanding how power and money influence/drive policy and laws in education.

By noticing what is and isn’t being measured, they may be able to see what the powers in control value, and what they value less, if at all. They may also be able to see how what is being measured is driving data-informed educational policy decisions, while what isn’t being measured (all those other skills) aren’t even in conversation with those policy decisions. A teacher might also ask students to individually reflect on the following questions: “Do you agree or disagree with what the educational system says is important?” “What does standardized educational assessment infer are less important or unimportant subjects of study?” “Do you agree?”

Teachers could also take a slightly different approach, especially with younger children, by tapping into students’ lived experiences. We might ask who is the fastest runner in the class? Who can draw the best? Who can play the guitar or piano? Who is the best person in the class to keep a secret? Who makes the best cookies, and so on, until everyone in the class is identified as an expert at something. We could ask them if it would be fair, if each of them had to do everything as well as each classroom expert before they were allowed to graduate and go to the next grade level. I am confident, no one would think that it was fair.

The follow-on to such discussions could be multi-fold. A teacher might discuss the fairness of expecting student b to be as good in math as student c on standardized tests. A teacher might ask how student b would feel about him/herself/themselves if he/she/they did poorly on the test, even though he/she/they was the best singer in the class. Would student b wonder why singing wasn’t on the test, but math was?
An interesting activity for older students might be to create a test to measure their own specific area of expertise, such as art or music, and then administer it to the class. For high school youth, a specialist’s art test might call on other non-specialist students to draw a cat in the following three styles: cubism, post-impressionism, and baroque, or a specialist in music might ask non-specialists to play a triad in C major on two instruments, or to sight-read a simple musical piece. The point I am trying to make is that math isn’t the only subject that is hard to master or that requires intensive training. One could argue that the arts are harder to master and require as much as or more training. Math is just one specialization, albeit a prioritized one by education policy-makers, as are language skills or the ability to communicate in multiple languages. It is critical that students understand this, but of more importance is that no child or youth should be made to feel as if he/she/they are deficient or less-than because they do poorly in subjects tested by the state exams. Students need to know that their strength in other areas add meaning and worth to the community.

**Standardized Tests**

As teachers, we know that standardized tests often favour those children raised in the dominant culture, those who speak the dominant language, and those whose beliefs align with dominant mores (Eizadirad, 2020). Those at the margins of the dominant social paradigm often do not do as well in such so-called “impartial” assessments (Au, 2016). Thus, the critical aspects of any assessment, standardized or otherwise, are serious realities that figure in education writ large or in classroom teacher practices, be they acknowledged or not. Assume for the moment that these critical factors are acknowledged and that assessments are impartial (which scholars such as Eizadirad (2019) understand is not the case), would standardized and classroom assessments then be acceptable? For me the answer is mostly a “No.” Standardized assessments are not only troublesome, but I also consider them to be neither wholly ethical nor wholly fair to students, educators, or tax-paying parents.

I have proposed a long-term solution informed by critical pedagogy, but what about the short-term? Children and youth, even armed with critical knowledge about assessment may not be able to refuse to take a standardized exam now while they are in school. I refer back to my son’s piano teacher for inspiration. She employed recovery pedagogy for use in a standardized assessment situation. Schoolteachers preparing their students for a standardized exam might also learn from this. We might ask, how can we help each student find individualized alternatives or work-arounds, for what standardized testing perceives as a learning weakness or a deficiency?

How can we help students game a standardized assessment system that students and teachers have been told is unavoidable and which has been sold as impartial (EQAO, 2022; Government du Québec, 2022; Poulsen & Hewson, 2014). I don’t mean that as educators we teach students to cheat but rather to teach them how to assert their agency in personal ways that might benefit them individually.

At an individual level, the mathematical equivalent of “alternate fingering” might be showing a child how to recognize patterns then apply them in a test situation. For example, when a young student can’t use a calculator that tricky nine times table can be plotted as a series of numbers where the first numeral of a two-digit number (the tens column) increases by one and the second numeral (the ones column) decreases by one, so you get:
A student could write this down, or adopt their own work-around, in the margins of a test.

In other disciplines, memorizing a quotation that could be useful and writing it down the moment the test begins to avoid forgetting it might be the thing called for. Depending on the individual, an “alternate fingering” equivalent can be devised by the teacher and student together for tactical advantage based on the student’s honest self-evaluation of their own skills and needs. These workarounds need to be as varied as there are students and as individualized as each student perceives his or her skill need to be. Given the dynamic and varied nature that these work-arounds need to be, this paper will not try to give more examples of them but leave it to teachers’ creativity to devise these.

I conclude by restating the need for critical long-term interventions that help students become aware of the value and motivations that inform imposed assessments of any kind. I would suggest that curriculums move towards a system of student self-assessment and external assessment only when the student asks for it. In the short-term, while we all wait for systemic assessment change, we help students develop a healthy distain for imposed assessment and help them cultivate tricks that help them to game what I consider to be unfair and partial assessment systems. One can only hope that if, as teachers, we’ve done this well, our students, when adults should they find themselves in positions of influence will work to change assessment policies so that the value of each contributor in the community is recognized, not just those who are good in math and literacy.
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