

Evaluation in the AL Model

Maps of Discovery

Actualized Learning intends to treat evaluations as maps for guiding our youth toward the realization of their potential, which in turn will lead to more significant contributions from which we all gain. We should really focus on assessments that serve our children by revealing their talents and aptitudes, versus how well they meet external demands. If they discover the best paths for themselves, then all of society will benefit. We should still have standards and expectations, because they help ensure everybody is aware of the consensus on what is indispensable to learn. That does not mean, however, we should strictly value accomplishments along those lines. Many students have a tremendous amount to offer, even if they are not inclined toward certain academic subjects.

Determining the direction best suited for someone requires comprehensive and on-going scrutiny. The whole gamut of assessments must be utilized and conducted regularly: observations in varied situations, noting personality traits, constant feedback (formative), diagnosing problem areas, comparative analyses (norm-referenced), ascertaining one's grasp of the material (criterion-referenced), measuring retention levels (summative), and weighing progress (benchmarks). It would be more edifying and accurate if they were handled in more substantive ways, however.

There will always be a role for traditional testing, but it should be used sparingly, and exclusively for determining knowledge of specific facts. Reading comprehension and writing skills are especially important, so they should certainly be assessed in their own right. On the other hand, evaluation of all other proficiencies should heavily emphasize authentic assessments, instead of the pencil and paper variety that is prominent in most classrooms. How well students access, apply, distinguish, sort, present, and organize information can better be demonstrated through purposeful tasks.

Assessments can be integrated into the learning process, instead of being tacked on as the culmination of study. There is an introductory stage to learning particular content, but never an end point, unless it is an independent fact like some algebraic formula or the periodic table of elements. Traditional testing can be used for that kind of knowledge, but everything else is a progression and needs to be

constantly monitored. Even hard facts are primarily helpful in how they can be used in the construction of higher learning. They assist in laying the foundation for more extensive accomplishments. It is, therefore, advantageous for teachers to evaluate while they are facilitating, to observe while they are getting involved, and to record findings while doing analysis.

Actualized Learning will perform detailed assessments of students on a wide range of characteristics, skills, propensities, achievements, and content knowledge. Traditional assessments have emphasized the retention of content, but in order to determine the full capabilities of a student we have to dig deeper. How many successful people were straight A students? Many, in fact, are autodidactic. By definition, many visionaries think in ways teachers have yet to imagine. How can that be tested? Exams can only reflect what their creators already know, and only determine if students know what the teachers think is important. Regular tests do not lend themselves well to innovative thinking. They only give us some insight into what a student retained about what was presented. Entrepreneurship and innovation break the mold, not cater to it. One dimensional tests should not determine students' futures. If they perform poorly through that medium, then their prospects are going to be short-changed. Thinking uniquely should be judged on its merit, not penalized. Testing, therefore, needs to account for other traits that reveal potential and proclivities. Exams should be informative and give direction for the student, but not lead to pigeon-holing or labeling. This is about identifying student talent, so they lead more fulfilling and productive lives. Giving teachers the tools for doing just that is critical.

AL will utilize a database that will accumulate information in a lot of categories, which examine student proficiency and characteristics in very precise ways. The grading system, which has been in use for as long as anyone can remember, is vague and fails to illuminate what students are capable of. Do grades actually represent levels of learning or understanding? There are students who get very good marks, but know little about the content for which they received the grades. They are just adept at rote learning. They can regurgitate facts, but without understanding their implications to a purposeful extent.

What does a "B" in History tell you about a student's understanding? Does (s)he grasp the causes and effects of momentous events, or was (s)he simply good at memorization? Do "D's" really mean a student has learned enough to pass a course? What's the point of that anyway? Administrators and politicians love to

see graduation rates, but do C's and D's indicate students learned the material enough to be functional and productive? Based on experience, I have to assert that the vast majority of students that pass a course retain very little of the subject matter afterward. Grades often do not represent what students are actually learning. They simply relate a percentage of correct answers on a test and a percentage of assignments completed. C's thus tell us that those students answered approximately three-quarters of the test questions correctly, and not much else. I have personally witnessed courses where grades are heavily influenced by irrelevant extra credit and points for doing meaningless busywork. In some classes the grading scale is weighted so there is as much credit given for homework as for tests. If you do not already know, homework is typically an exercise in copying from a book, friend, or website. Sometimes it is nothing more than practicing an incorrect way of doing something. Extraneous grading should be eliminated. It should always be purposeful and reflective of performance. If grades do not represent the degree of actual learning, they do not serve us well as a gauge for adjusting instruction, guiding feedback and interventions, or helping our youth discover viable channels for their lives.

Instead of the A to F grade scale derived from percentages, almost every letter of the alphabet in combination with numbers should represent a distinctive quality in relation to the subject matter, skills, and characteristics. Depth of knowledge (DOK) designations could be very appropriate for these purposes, as would SCAN skills and personality traits or learning preferences.

So what can be done with this information? What is the purpose of testing and a grading system, anyway? Historically, they have been used to identify general fields of study in which one is good or lacking. They established a pecking order for academic advancement and job opportunities. Some insight into the acquisition of fundamental skills for the needs of the marketplace was achieved. There has been growing recognition of the need to analyze data for modifying instruction and pinpointing areas for interventions, but with little clarity and guidance on how to go about it or follow through, except in some acute cases. The mechanisms and consistency that are essential to successful implementation are virtually nonexistent.

All of those intents are worthwhile, but do they go far enough? There are so many other critical factors that should be ascertained. It is important to gather clear information on exactly how students learn best, and then supply them with

the means for doing so. It is important for teachers to know what they are doing right, and how to adjust when they are not. It is important to identify precisely what students have learned, and have outlets for them to apply it. It is important to uncover weaknesses, and provide the avenues for overcoming them. It is important to ascertain individual strengths, then chart a course for self-fulfillment. It is important to inspire and motivate students by using evaluations as a form of recognition, as opposed to beating them down by highlighting what they do not know. Evaluations should be to those ends, instead of pretending that grades represent who is worthy and who is not.

Regular and immediate feedback can be very useful for guiding students within the learning process, but a link should be made to the bigger picture, as well. Information, gleaned from assessments, can be used as a reality check in regard to where pupils stand in relation to their overall progress and aspirations. Children are often unrealistic about how they are doing or how they will be able to miraculously salvage a bad situation at the last minute. Procrastination and muddling through until crunch time are extremely common. That tendency reveals the notion that the only thing that matters is some future determination, like a test score or final grade. The rest is just a means to an end; so, if you put it off or give it a marginal effort, no big deal. Learning has all too frequently become subordinate to some abstract symbol of accomplishment.

Evaluations are road signs for the educational journey. They identify where you are and the directions for reaching your destination. You need a map to smoothly traverse through the landscape. They help you avoid the obstacles and the distress of getting lost. Like all expeditions, there will be roadblocks, detours, potholes, rest stops, places to get nourishment, and points of interest along the way. Evaluations chart that course of discovery and guide you via the best possible route to the ultimate destination: Self-fulfillment.