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Connected Assessment: Electronic Assessment Tools Close the Gap

by Pam Nelson

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Online and electronic assessment tools are available from many sources, including publishers. Do they meaningfully fit into the classroom? We asked Pam Nelson, senior VP of marketing at Rinehart and Winston, who has a long career in teaching and in the education publishing industry, about their value and application.

1. Why electronic assessment and why now?

There are many factors that make the need for electronic assessment (EA) tools more compelling than ever before. Ten years ago it was the parents and principals who most closely evaluated the teacher. Now teachers are measured by how well their students score on state-mandated tests that leaves them vulnerable to public scrutiny by individuals who may or may not understand the process. We also have higher expectations for funding. The No Child Left Behind Act increases accountability by tying funding directly to the performance of every student in the class. All of us have been in the classroom and understand the challenge of keeping 30 children with varying skills performing at a mastery level in all subjects.

Electronic assessment tools help our schools deal with these added pressures. EA can enhance a teacher's ability to be objective and efficient. As teachers, our first reaction is that technology depersonalizes teaching when in fact electronic assessment enhances a teacher's ability to instruct. Here is an example from a teacher at Cypress Lake High School in Florida, who commented on how she uses Holt Online Essay Scoring:

"I can give [my students] detailed feedback printing out their essays from the Teacher Class under View Essays. This is so amazing to me. I am freed up to then do one-on-one tutoring during the writing process with ESOL, ESE, and new students enrolling so near the exam date."

This is the type of tool we need to give our teachers to help each student be successful. The time spent preparing for or giving tests reduces available instruction time. Teachers' days are busy and it is difficult to find the time to provide individualized feedback on a consistent and ongoing basis. Electronic assessment tools can make up for lost instruction time and give our teachers some freedom to provide individualized instruction and focused learning paths.

2. What is the significance of EA?

First, electronic assessment allows for consistent evaluation of material. Disparate individual classes all receive the same evaluation—this makes instructional decisions based on assessment valid. And this works even in a subjective discipline like writing. We can teach computers to evaluate subjective materials using human conventions and then rely on the consistency of the technology. Computers never waiver from the rules we establish and are not influenced by conscious or unconscious factors or fatigue.

Second, we can tie EA tools directly to standards and define specific proficiencies or standards demonstrated by the student. Using the results, a teacher will immediately know what type of instruction is needed to reteach or remediate because we program the computer to know exactly what

and how to score based on a rubric of standard expectancies.

Third, EA has direct benefits for learners because they receive immediate feedback, which is motivating. We have stories from teachers saying their students use Holt Online Essay Score like a game. Because they can edit their essays on the system and see immediate suggestions for improving their score, many students immediately rewrite and resubmit their essays using the feedback. It's like having a personal tutor for each student. Research (and our experience) tells us that immediacy is key in improving proficiency.

Fourth, teachers can use EA as a diagnostic tool for their classes to notice trends and areas of weakness. With EA, scores can be aggregated or disaggregated to see which concepts are understood by the class and which need work. In other words, electronic assessment tools generate instructional efficiency.

3. Tell us more about data analysis.

A key advantage of EA is the ability to track and monitor student progress in the mastery of concepts. We now have the ability to see real data in total, in groups, or against other demographic parameters. A teacher can use the data to look for trends and then teach to areas of weakness that surface. For example, if 80 percent of the class scores well on five of seven concepts, the teacher knows they should revisit the two concepts not well understood. The point is that the teacher can make decisions based on data.

On a larger scale, an administrator can identify weaknesses by grade level or tie those results to other demographic information. This allows for scheduled intervention for groups of students who are below minimum proficiency standards. Ultimately, administrators can identify weaknesses in the current teaching practices that aren't preparing students for minimum achievement on standardized tests.

4. How do teachers and administrators use EA effectively?

EA is used effectively when teachers know how to use the tools and assess their results. An administrator can use the results to streamline professional development and tailor teacher training to areas that need improvement for mastery of the standards as identified by the assessment. If particular schools have low scores on standardized tests, then professional development can be targeted to school-wide change and teaching strategies to improve performance. The same scenario can be applied to particular groups or even individual classrooms.

5. Is increased testing the solution?

We should not treat testing and preparation for standardized tests like the skill-and-drill exercises because we might lose sight of the overall teaching goal. I think most teachers and administrators realize this. Instead, electronic assessment can be used as a diagnostic tool and a predictor of performance on standardized tests. Use the data to diagnose shortcomings in individual students and help teachers tailor their lessons. Or use the aggregated data to identify trends: groups of students needing remediation or teachers who need additional skill with subject areas. It is also possible to identify school-wide trends and tailor professional development plans to help the school's administrators and teaching staff.

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