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Technology and Authentic Assessment in a High-Stakes World

Since the publication of the *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Educational Excellence in 1983, our nation has moved, state-by-state, toward first standardized, then high-stakes testing. High stakes testing is an increasing trend toward using standardized test results as the sole basis for grade retention and promotion or for graduation. The benefit of high-stakes testing is bottom-line accountability at the least cost, but the potential harm of high-stakes testing may exact a heavier toll than money. Despite the potential negative effects of high-stakes testing on children, the call for accountability and high-stakes testing does not seem destined soon to die out, especially with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act which, according to the Florida Department of Education's web site, demands "stronger accountability for results". With so much riding on the high stakes test, it is important that teachers maintain other assessments to mitigate any misuse of the test, such as failing a student who did poorly on the test, but performed satisfactorily on class work. Technology, by making possible efficient authentic assessments, can help teachers do this. Technology can also provide a foundation for remediation for students who fail to graduate or are retained in grade. Before the tests, teachers may use technology to help students improve their test-taking skills and with technology, communication via email and web sites becomes a vital link between teachers and parents.

One of the best descriptions of technology states that technology is "not a collection of machines and devices, but a way of acting" (Mufoletto, 1994, p. 25). This way of acting includes using the most current tools of technology, computers and their related technologies, both hardware and software, to address educational needs and problems (Roblyer, 2003, p. 6). Lidtke and Moursund (1993) examined metastudies that suggested, "that in a broad range of educational settings CAI [Computer Assisted Instruction] helps students to learn more much faster" (p. 84). As discussed later, technology can also engage students when used in project-based authentic assessments and can increase student motivation.
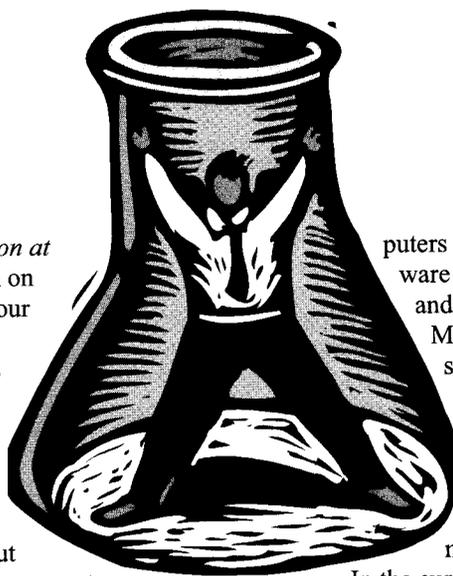
In the current atmosphere of accountability, it is vital that teachers utilize every tool at their disposal in the classroom to ensure their students get the best possible chance at success on a high-stakes test.

High-Stakes World

According to Kubiszyn and Borich (2003), "A September 2000 poll conducted by *Public Agenda* reported that about 80% [of those polled] said statewide tests are useful in evaluating performance of teachers, students and schools" (p. 34). This belief has led all 50 states and Washington DC to invoke some type of standardized testing. Standardized tests are useful in that they "can provide objective information that can be useful for educational decision making" (Kubiszyn & Borich, 2003, p. 20). The danger of standardized testing lies in the potential misuse of the high-stakes test.

All fifty states now have some kind of high-stakes standardized test. The NEA says of the No Child Left Behind Act,

The new law will dramatically change the face of public education in a number of ways:

- New requirements for states to develop annual standardized tests for students in third through eighth grade.
- New consequences for schools that do not meet "adequate yearly progress" targets for all students at the same time -- regardless of their individual differences and needs. (NEA web site, Next Steps section, para. 1).

Although these provisions of NCLB are not yet detailed, it is still clear that high-stakes is becoming more entrenched in American education.

High-Stakes Tests and Students

The effect of high stakes testing on students who do not graduate or are grade retained is pronounced, and the stress students feel because of the tests can be heartbreaking. Shelley Terzian (2002) tells of her student, Beth, an 11-year-old in the 4th grade, in a high-stakes state and a low performing school:

a student in my class who would continually shout out, 'I am going to fail.' An 11-year-old in the 4th grade, Beth had low self-esteem concerning her own learning potential. Reminding Beth that the ISAT was only a test measuring what she knew

She continues,
I noticed another student, Justin, continually playing with his shoelaces. I went over to his desk and offered some words of encouragement. This seemed to work, but then I noticed that another student was shaking at her desk. As I went around the room comforting my students, their individual nervous behaviors recurred within seconds of my turning away (p. 282).

Children Left Behind

Cavanagh (2003) estimated that "70 percent of all public school students will face exit exams by 2008 if they want to earn diplomas" (p. 24). Yet in 2002, percentages of students failing exit exams on the first try varied wildly state to state with five percent to 69% failing the math portion and five to 42% failing the English. African-American, Hispanic, and disabled students were also less likely than Caucasians and Asian-Americans to pass the exams on the first try (*Education USA*, 2002, p. 3). Exit exams are obviously not equitable and many school districts are begging for a variety of assessments to be used in conjunction with that of the standardized test, in making a final graduation decision. However, even if the standardized test remains the only basis for graduation, teachers who use a variety of assessments might

sors, teachers, parents, and even students believe it is better to be retained than be promoted to the next grade if students have not mastered the content (Abstract, Retention section, para. 1).

This is significant considering fifteen to nineteen percent of U.S. students are retained in grade each year (Holmes & Saturday, 2000). Holmes and Saturday go on to say that grade retention had a quite negative effect on academic achievement, with those students who were grade-level retained continuing to score less than their peers for the duration of their academic careers. The negative effect was not limited to academic achievement. The researchers found "...pupils view retention as punishment and experience emotions such as fear, anger, and sadness" (Abstract, Retention and Personal Adjustment section, para. 1). Holmes & Saturday (2000) stated these two factors combined might be the reason that "...a study of middle school dropouts found that grade retention was the single most powerful predictor of a student's decision to leave school" (Abstract, Retention and School Dropouts section, para. 2). With these kinds of consequences, it is important to make sure that students are appropriately assessed before they are denied promotion. Furthermore, if a student is retained, it is equally imperative that the curriculum be changed for that student in the com-

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about social studies and science was not enough to boost her flagging self-esteem. How could these words comfort a student who was retained twice in the 3rd grade for not meeting the required score on the ITBS? Beth did not understand the difference between how the results of the ISAT and the ITBS tests were used. Her understanding was that if she didn't do well she would fail (p. 282).

have insight into the student's weaknesses and be able to tailor a remediation plan with the ultimate goal of passing the exit exam. Kaplan & Owings (2001) stated,

For more than 75 years, research has shown that grade-level retention has no academic advantages for students. In spite of the research, Public Agenda's Reality Check 2000 finds that a majority of employers, profes-

ing year to assess and address the student's academic problems and to prevent another retention. Technology and authentic assessments can help on both those fronts.

Technology and Authentic Assessment

Authentic assessment is more time-consuming and subjective than standardized testing, but it also provides a linear picture of a child's progression

over time, rather than a one-day snapshot of a student's knowledge. Authentic assessment is generally more reflective and is based on either performance or a portfolio showcasing a student's progression toward the academic goals and objectives in the classroom.

According to Kubiszyn and Borich (2003), when teachers use performance-based assessments, they "... establish situations that allow them to observe and to rate learners directly" (p. 154). They continue, "These situations stimulate real-world activities." Assessing these types of activities usually requires a more in-depth scoring system, like a rubric. As long as the activities are inspired by objectives drawn from state or federal standards, the rubric can help align the performance test with those standards. The objectives should detail the outcomes or behavior students are expected to exhibit by the end of the activity (Kubiszyn and Borich, 2003). To align the performance assessment with state and federal standards, the foundation of the performance assessment should be objectives based on those standards. Performance assessments aligned with state and federal standards can be vital to the fate of a student whose promotion, retention, or graduation hangs on the thread of a high-stakes test.

Technology can aid in this kind of assessment, when directly aligned with state standards, by bringing efficiency to the process, allowing less preparation time after the initial investment of creating various products to use with student assessment. Computers can be a valuable tool with which to inform parents, organize lessons, and adapt instruction and present ideas to the class. Standard forms, worksheets and other word processing documents can be created for routine tasks, while templates can be made for lesson plans or rubrics. If a standard format is always used for rubrics, teachers may be better able to communicate students' performance to parents. File management techniques can be a time saving device, allowing teachers to organize lesson plans and collect materials for new activities such as web sites, presentations or other multi-media tools.

Students can also benefit from using technology when performing authentic activities. According to

Railsback (2002), project-based learning "...build on children's individual strengths, and allows them to explore their interests in the framework of a defined curriculum (p. 7). Project-based learning also incorporates the practices that generally encourage students to be engaged (p. 7). Technology is one important way to engage students in the learning process, a goal that becomes of utmost importance when a student has been retained or prevented from graduating. A 2000 study by Deaney, Hennessy, and Ruthven (2003) said of secondary school students feelings toward computer-based tools and resources, "They associated the use of such tools and resources with changes in working ambience and classroom relations, as well as with raised interest and increased motivation on their part" (Abstract, para. 1).

Technology and Remediation

Teachers can also use technology for remediation with students. Drill and practice software can be used to familiarize students with basic concepts that will be presented on the state standardized tests. Roblyer says of students using this software, "When they need to prepare to demonstrate mastery of a specific set of skills in important examinations (e.g., for end-of-year grades or for college entrance), drill and practice courseware can help them focus on their deficiencies and correct

them" (p. 91). Teachers can also engage students by monitoring their progress through an authentic project and evaluating that student's needs based on the level of performance of the projects over time. Thus, if a student was assessed using authentic measurements and was retained or failed to graduate, a teacher could use the authentic assessments from the pre-

vious years in combination with the standardized test scores to develop a plan that would foster the likelihood of graduation or promotion.

Technology and Communication

Another vital role technology has to play in this high-stakes climate is that of communication. Communicating with parents via e-mail or a web site has several advantages. First, rubrics or progress reports sent via e-mail can help reinforce what is expected of the child and inform the parents as to how that child is progressing. Rubrics, lesson plans, resources and other curriculum-related information can be posted on a web site, providing parents with continuous access to instruction activities. Important dates such as assignment due dates, field trips or holidays can also be posted on a site as well as alerts to parents to check on homework before it is due.

A web site could also become a valuable testing resource, as the time for standardized tests approaches. A school could publish general tips on nutrition and sleep or list specific test-taking strategies and study techniques children can practice to make them more comfortable with the test. Private emails could be sent to parents prior to testing time if any significant problems seem present so that the student gets any help he or she may need before facing the test.

Exit exams are obviously not equitable and many school districts are begging for a variety of assessments to be used in conjunction with that of the standardized test, in making a final graduation decision.

In Short

Technology is an important tool in any classroom curriculum, but it is vital to the high-stakes classroom. The benefits of technology can be as simple as rote practice or as complex as the strategic means by which performance-based projects are completed. Yet through the range of the learning strategies, the opportunities technology affords can motivate students to achieve

their goals. Those left behind on a high stakes test must have a means to overcome the odds and regain success. Technology, in combination with authentic assessments, can help students by engaging and motivating them, proving their progress over time and by serving as a remediation tool when necessary. Technology can also serve to keep parents informed and involved in a climate where what is at stake is their children's future. Just as standardized testing is best left a tool, not a weapon, so can technology and authentic assessment be tools. Tools that can rebuild what the weapon leaves behind.

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Book Review

Review of The Internet and the Law: What Educators Need to Know by Kathleen Conn

There is a need to get in touch with the realities and dangers surrounding the use of the computer within school district settings. This author does a good job of alerting school district personnel to some of more pressing issues, at the same time she lists further sources for educators to contact for even more information.

Conn recommends "policy-not paranoia" in helping districts set reasonable guidelines for use of the Internet. Conn also reminds us that legal and ethical information for setting such policies is available, and she provides us with the statutes and court decisions so that we can do more research, if we'd like.

Covering everything from how court cases against schools work to how we should set policies on the privacy issues surrounding personal use of district computer to access email, Conn gives us a great deal of guidance in a brief book. This book will be very helpful reading for not only school administrators but also for members of school boards and school councils.

Another topic covered by Conn is the privacy question regarding web sites and other computer work done by students or staff outside of school time. How much freedom does an individual have to criticize a school's staff or policies? These and other questions are given attention by Conn.

I recommend the text because it is not just a good brief introduction but also a good source of information for further investigation. With our computer-savvy students, we must all learn more about technology.

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