Notes from “Assessment in the 21st Century:” Mini-Conference in Consultation with Ed Gordon’s Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education

April 11, 2011
(taken by Jennifer Van Tiem)

-in chronological order-

Varenne:
• politics of assessment within the policy of assessment
• not to make it fairer or raise achievement gap
• what we are interested in gets underground
• let’s not complain about how terrible things are, let’s look at what would we want instead, what do we propose instead

McClintock
• not concerned that assessments are biased (in the traditional sense), but biasing, in that the use of assessments with large statistical cohorts that says (negative things?) about people legitimates pejorative and adverse decision making
• there is too little attention to the whole process by which assessments legitimate the promotion of some and the demotion of others relative to the distribution of goods and yet almost all assessments are valued against statistical cohorts rather than relate to person’s future that they impinge on
• there is a serious disjunction, there, in terms of the legitimating functions of assessments
• a positive use of emerging assessments is possible, given the possibility of embedding real-time assessment feedback to the user, who in this case, would be the student, who is currently given little feel in the process of inquiry
• past technological innovations limited students’ ability to do intelligent innovation, to really try to develop real-time feedback systems that would be useful in students’ decision making and allow the student to adjudicate their own patterns of attention, moving closer or further away from their own intentionality

McDermott
• emotions and politics
• sociobehavioral sciences are being used to screw kids
• we would say something to kids on Tuesday, they would remember it on Wednesday, but there was nothing we could see or feel
• super-refined tasks had nothing to do with lives kids were living
• ecological validity, ecological niche-picking
• fundamentally disconnected from seeds in which people lived their lives
• new cultural deprivation movement: employment and wealth distribution model fits to a shocking level
• again worried about questions and answers: anthropologists bring question and answer pairs, one has to ask the question at the right time and place in order to interpret the answer
Xeno’s paradox – we in US have turned Xeno’s paradox into an institution called schooling – there is always a gap, always an achievement gap at the end
• one can look for a formality to describe what we are doing with testing, and can avoid a discussion of race, class, etc.

Anderson-Levitt
• Stanford sociology suggests that school has taken the same form all over the world - schooling is a universal
• UNESCO: 90% of the children in the world are in schools
• this has hit in the last 80 years
• the way we do teaching and assessment is shaping everyday life
• why do you need assessment?
• paper in recent journal: "Side by Side" (couldn’t find authors – it was two women) – part of what schooling is about is formal education, or the deliberate intervention in learning, that separates learning activities from everyday life
• schools create this dependence on adults telling “it’s right” because students are doing a lot of strange stuff
• school learning has to be through symbolic means – talking about it rather than doing it

Varenne
• it everyday life, (assessment?) is ongoing – it’s not that there’s no assessment, there is continual assessment by possibly not experts
• what would a Chinese Anthropology of Education look like? how would you write this?
• the American Constitution doesn’t say anything about education...when did the French get into the business of creating public schools?
• concern over public schools controlled by the state – what do we mean by formal – does formal equal controlled by the state and almost no uncontrolled formal schooling?
• when did we start saying schools have to be publicly supported and controlled?
• leads to assessment, NCLB
• knowledge is disconnected and you can go wrong

McClintock
• basic logic for schools came early and it was basically religious, instead of politico-social
• formation of child into orthodoxy of religion
• the right to school got transferred from the church to the state
• education was laicized – question of who has authority – state or religion?
• derives from religious transcendentalism that has been taken over by state without question
• legitimation process that has to substitute for divine right
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Andrews
- state control of schools may have been correlated to establishment of professions, which shaped what the end product was going to look like – standardization of education as a process

Posecznick
- movement towards credentialization as a fundamental aspect leading to the state control of schools
- learning happens, but it is irrelevant
- education system is a means of communication (Andrews: of a worthy product)
- question of translation: the translation from one place to another – how to meaningfully communicate meaning
- schooling is assessment
- no such thing as schooling without assessment

Anderson-Levitt
- social selection done through academic selection
- how was social selection done in the past? – kinship, patronage – maybe academic selection is a better option?

Varenne
- it is not clear what co-opts what – birth privilege or schools
- there is education, but at what point do we get co-opted by the state to be the purveyor of assessment?

Velasquez
- how do assessments work? – assessments work only if you identify what a skill is
- what counts as a skill and as a learner?
- who gets to learn which skills?
- assessments are geared towards skills that are valued
- how do you make students aware of what they need to know without feeding into the cycle?
- a learned skill (Posecznick: a measurable skill)

McClintock
- the stock of knowledge and opinion available to people is ubiquitously there – and there is no longer any knowledge actually immediate to anybody
- does a paradigm of teaching and learning make any sense?
- extend Wikipedia two generations down the pike – does anybody need to learn anything as a stock of knowledge or is everything on-demand inquiry
- as learning gets significantly de-valued, what does that mean for processes of assessment?
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Andrews
- techno-utopianism
- there is a gender imbalance in Wikipedia
- who knows how to read Wikipedia in a way that is useful? ...of value in a way that makes society better
- need to shift the kind of learning – more interpretative, but this is hard to come by with current assessment

Velasquez
- how to do research is becoming a marketable skill, but it narrows the fields in which people can act

Varenne
- we have collapsed Wikipedia into just another thing to learn
- but, say you are on Wikipedia, you have just checked something, come to a conclusion, and how do you find who in the world is going to tell you that you are wrong?
- need an ongoing assessment
- question bout transition – beside the fact hat we hate school for becoming a machine to assign merit
- do we reclaim schools for education or do we get rid of schools?
- also, if kids are not in schools, where are they?

McClintock
- spread of codes in working world – builder, electrical codes, codes for framing, construction
- in virtually every field of action, there are highly rationalized codes of production and the development of institutions to enforce those codes
- this all seems to related to the question of assessment
- for example – for the lawyer, the important assessment is relative to the BAR association rather than one’s grades in law school: this somehow has to be taken into account
- shifting assessment out of education institution and into the locus of application
- do we know a lot about codes in the real world?

Varenne
- in the context of other forms of assessment, there is a lot of education, learning, etc that is already going on and we have to find a way...we do not study it because it is difficult to measure (but we should find a way?)

Velasquez
- pervasive rhetoric at this construction site (for example) was that immigrant Mexican laborers were “unskilled,” which is not an appropriate or particularly accurate description – but if we can’t measure “skills,” what do we do?
Wessler
- you can measure “health” because there is a disconnect between learning and outcomes

Varenne
- do we know the right thing? hip clicks versus hip clunks, but here, we have very little assessment. what is it? did we learn the right thing?

Andrews
- how much of the assessment that counts happens in schools?
- perhaps we should look more closely at industries related to information

Varenne
- how can expert voices be heard?
- it’s important to keep in mind not just the Wiki, but the interpretation of the Wiki – for example, on Foucault’s Wikipedia page, you will not be in on the joke

Andrews
- how is your interpretation going to be wrong until you run into an expert?

Posecznich
- schooling is assessment
- crisis of credentialism

Scroggins
- perhaps we should consider Marilyn Strathern’s latest edited volume Audit Cultures

Wessler
- measure competencies

Varenne
- one has to pay for own assessment system

McClintock
- there is a difference between the kind of collective assessment that we are uneasy about and code-assessment, which takes a concrete case that either conforms or is out of conformation with code
- how do we make this significant in a human sense?
- what is the person who is doing the performance considers that it is not the best way to do it – the doer legitimizes the critique, in contrast to the current statistical assessments of large groups, which is alienating
- need to pay attention to what will allow the person being assessed that the assessment has some value for them rather than just being an impersonal judgment
Anderson-Levitt
- suggested that Professor McClintock is talking about mastery learning and norm versus criteria reference
- we should be careful to pay attention to educational psychology

McDermott
- in looking at Dr. Gordon’s statement, would like to see an evaluation system that delivers us the kind of educational system Dr. Gordon says that we already have

Varenne
- we should pay particular attention to the sentence in Dr. Gordon’s statement: “We have seen our schools move from an essentially sorting function to a concern with the development of the differential characteristics of a diverse student body to the possibility of the achievement of "common core" standards of academic mastery.”

McDermott
- pointed out that we don’t have that (what Dr. Gordon describes).
- we are performing an assessment of a world that we do not have

Velasquez
- students don’t fail assessments equally

Varenne
- Dr. Gordon started out as a minister, then went into counseling
- Dr. Gordon wants us to be practical, he knows he has to speak to Arnie Duncan and ETS

Anderson-Levitt
- “value-added education” can be a helpful phrase

Varenne
- sure, the point of a teacher is to move a student from point A to point B
- how do you measure that?
- when do you measure that?
- some people have suggested even more tests, to really chart over time
- Dr. Gordon wants them (Duncan, ETS) to hear something else, even though they’re not going to like it

Posecznick
- curious about narrative texts and qualitative forms of assessment
- in this line, the assessment would not be turning a text into A or B, but having the text be the assessment

Scroggins
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- in his experience at Evergreen:
  - narrative assessments are tougher intellectually
  - found himself thinking about the future, his future-self
  - said it was hellish for students and professors

Anderson-Levitt
- UC Santa Cruz was founded on narrative evaluation and evolved boiler plate paragraphs to ameliorate some of the work load

Posecznick
- curious about the translatability of those scripts

Scroggins
- someone at Evergreen eventually assigned the transcript a grade

Anderson-Levitt
- narrative text assessments are similar to faculty committee choosing a new faculty member

Varenne
- in hiring promotion and tenure, question of being sued
  - problem with assessment is that, at the end, you end up with a credential
  - Xeno’s paradox: either you get in or thrown out of the next level
  - narratives become decorative

McClintock
- there is a moral failure in the language used in the whole discussion
  - the real pay off is the preferment and privileging people and putatively legitimizing preferment
  - not giving feedback or assessing is the same thing in terms of discerning between something done well and something done poorly
  - Dr. Gordon’s committee may be one more effort to blur the lines of what’s being done – a discourse of legitimacy

Varenne
- why doesn’t ETS get into other forms of assessment? they are paid by universities – the SAT is designed by universities for universities
  - ETS is a business, at its core are the clients
  - all this talk about assessment bounces back to our world
  - ETS would transform if the universities didn’t buy its product
  - do they use another product?

Scroggins
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- back to disability and due diligence

Posecznick
- in his dissertation, the existing assessment did not favor the institution – it was an assessment mismatch
- on the part of the institution, there was a basic lack of fluency in the assessment being used
- for students, it goes into how much do students know about the assessment
- some institutions know what they’re being assessed on

Varenne
- there is a correspondence between students struggling and colleges that are 4th or 5th rank – the assessment system ranks colleges like it ranks students
- institution in Posecznick’s dissertation – it provides a service – why are we looking down at this college? it is not a bad college that needs to be reformed in order to fill the achievement gap
- assessment illiteracy

Posecznick
- the institution (represented by admissions counselors, administrators) is aware of their rank, but it doesn’t affect the day to day
- they are aware in a vague sense of where they are in the order

McClintock
- we are raising fundamental questions about the general expectations about the uses of assessment
- it is highly doubtful, the apparent correlations between earnings and success in education – it is a statistical phenomenon related to how patterns of inequality has increased...inevitably, the most educated...it looks like because of education, the most educated are earning a great deal more
- there is no evidence that higher levels of success in assessment correlate with national power, political stability, happiness, or GDP
- I don’t know of any very compelling evidence that suggests these things are the case – are these important questions to raise?

Varenne
- yes, we should raise those issues, it is what Dr. Gordon hopes we will do

McClintock
- raise questions rather than suggest answers

Varenne
• given schooling is cloaked with privilege, the correlations between degrees and incomes are false, they obscure all kinds of stuff
• our charge is to raise more important questions, not to just go from one kind of assessment to another
• school-based assessments are designed to reproduce privilege
• if you want certain types of legitimacy, you need to go through that system

Velasquez
• graduation college is a (the?) model of citizenship

McClintock
• is there a possibility of somehow assessing social ethos?
• status climbing is a major sign of success
• a focus on aspiration, which has very little to do with competence
• we’ve lost the capacity to appreciate artisanal capacity and competence
• the working class is not only oppressed, but their achievements are getting destroyed
• the ability to take pride in achievement in a relatively circumscribed area of action is being lost
• one of the things amiss in the ethos of assessment is that unless you get into the top dozen, kids feel that they have not performed well or achieved anything
• topsy-turvy
• winners take all
• how do we counter that?

Varenne
• my privilege is based on large numbers of people doing their job well
• realization of how limited TC’s scope is: the achievement gap as measured on these kinds of tests

Velasquez
• in order to get funding, you have to show that there is a problem

McClintock
• don’t know how tests are normed, but over large scale quantitative testing, the tests seem to be applied to larger and larger cohorts
• thought experiment: SAT should be normed against a great variety of coherent demographic groupings

---BREAK---

Varenne
• metapragmatics
• metacommunication
• need to celebrate this kind of work (ethnography about Mexican immigrants teaching themselves English) to assessment people
• assessment people would see these immigrants as poor, with the position that “we should go and help them,” but how do we make our point and how do we carry through without jumping so far to the ethical position?
• Dr. Gordon has always wanted to work through the system
• as part of the ongoing production of culture of poverty, it looks more likely that our legitimacy fades
• if people get a career without schooling, we’ll be in real trouble

Velasquez
• how do you show learning without a fundamental model, such as classroom, teacher, assessment?

Varenne
• on matters of health, there is something we’d simply like to say, but we can’t just say it to them

McClintock
• we need more structures that people feel they want to go to for some reason, then the assessments become an assessment of their own

Anderson-Levitt
• like the Protestant Church (?)

McClintock
• self-improving systems
• open source programming efforts
• what makes these things work and work well?
• highly public and transparent criteria of success
• talk pages
• user ethos of Wikipedia
• user community – self-assessor and identifier
• education system as a self-improving system – what does an autodidact share with these large, collective things?

Varenne
• crowd collection – not quite autodidactic because you are not by yourself
• if you don’t have a feedback system...

McClintock
• what if we could compare the talk pages of Wikipedia with people’s internal discourses while they are using Wikipedia?
Varenne
- with a crowd source, even if one person goes off the deep end, it is not too important because the crowd decides what is important
- auto-didaction can only go so far
- there is a responsibility to teach some kind of official doctrine (even if assessment is problematic)
- this is important in terms of letting new knowledge appear-
- reproduction is not that automatic
- question: what are the mechanisms and how does it work?
- Thorndike thought testing was a great democratic equalizer
- how do you create a mechanism to treat everyone separately on the basis of their own merit?
- every step makes things more like what we hate
- you have people who are concerned and we are trying to develop a tool
- there is going to be an assessment, so what will it look like?

Andrews
- what motivations do the privileged have to share privilege?

Velasquez
- students themselves aren’t the only ones getting assessed – schools are too
- can’t let the kids fail because if the kids fail, the schools fail, and the community fails

Scroggins
- schools audit themselves
- exterminator issue

McDermott
- people who know ho to do it can’t get the right answer
- people who don’t know how to do it can get the right answer

Varenne
- talking about new TC requirements: “what is the learning goal of this class and how do you assess it?”
- the less you think about it, the easier it will be
- as long as TC can report that you do it, no one much cares how you do it

McDermott
- no productive relation between how they perform and what happens next

Varenne
- the formula the Board of Education has developed to give a grade to teachers is an amalgam of all sorts of measurements
- since nobody but the experts can read the thing and make sense of it, it must be really real
McDermott
- would like to outline a response to Dr. Gordon’s question:
- don’t like norm-referenced standardized tests
- but Ed’s not going to go there
- there will be tests
- structure in the language of knowledge and skill
- used to arrange access into a hierarchy
- given that, how can we create an assessment in the service of democracy, in a way people will be responsible for their own expertise
1. demand of ETS: they use some criterion other than distribution across a population for the adequacy of their questions
2. demand of ETS: some question/answer pairs that answer to certain kinds of skills in certain environments – the test will be generalizable, generaliz-utility
3. question, answer, skill triad has to be demonstrably available in the world (…..skills are too embedded, too emergent, too deployed (?) across people)
4. don’t test for any skill complex without being forced to articulate that the students would do better if they could answer this question

Varenne
- now, we have break down by population, but what if it could be broken down by task – no global score possible
- ETS has a vocational type of test, but those don’t sell

Velasquez
- how do you standardize a person’s world?

Anderson-Levitt
- that is McDermott’s point

McDermott
- there is no way ETS will design a test sensitive to the individual, but they could have some ideas about how a question articulates with skills out in the world
- given that they’re not going away, what are an alternative set of pressures we could bring on them?

McClintock
- a contextual recommendation, including a definition of the uses of the test and a good faith attempt to specify what it has been developed for
- also, it would be important to control distribution of the results to those who need to know in order to effect change based on the results
- be careful not to interject results into a domain that the tests were not meant for – tests results weren’t designed for X purpose
McDermott
- often, tests are not designed for X, but are certainly sold for this purpose

McClintock
- data from these tests is intimate

Varenne
- ETS is not the audience
- this is to Susan Fuhrman or Jeff Heding (spelling?) – people who have an impact on ETS
- who is the audience? Arnie Duncan? because ETS will provide whatever the universities want
- Ed would like me to give him a good argument that he could sell

McDermott
- Achilles and the tortoise
- if you pay attention to what Achilles does do, the problem disappears

de Wolfe
- possibility of portfolio assessment – experience with it in special education

Varenne
- eventually the portfolios get transformed into a 1-2-3 system
- whatever it is that you are going to use for the test, what do you do with the results of the test?
- tragedy of public schooling: starts as a wonderful idea and 70 years later, it has made very little difference for children of ...(missed what you said, sorry)
- Cremin: maybe schooling hasn’t changed class structure, but you have children who now know about Shakespeare
- getting a Baccalaureate becomes a proxy
- all the good stuff gets taken over

Tirthali
- starting with good intentions – even what we create will become warped – we must accept that

Varenne
- this is still worth doing, even if it is going to be co-opted

McClintock
- do the testers in test-design have a responsibility not to be distorting on the curriculum with respect to schools
• tests distort preferred educational process, as teachers teach to the test
• limitations of the testing process lead to testers saying that the test is a superior curriculum

Varenne
• the Baccalaureate was a good test because it was based on the curriculum
• a test that is a sample tricks teachers into teaching around things that might be sampled

McDermott
• only in the face of a standardized test