

# Assessment Benefits and Barriers

## What Are You Committed To?

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*The barriers can be surmounted, and the benefits provide the incentive to make the effort.*

One of the greatest challenges that physical educators face in their work is the assessment of student learning. To learn more about the “real” issues pertaining to student assessment in physical education, the authors asked a group of teachers to identify the barriers to, and benefits of, using assessments. The purpose of this article is to discuss these teachers’ perceptions regarding assessment and to examine why physical educators are reluctant to use assessments even though they know that assessing their students is beneficial.

As you read this article, please take a moment to consider how each question or statement might relate to your personal beliefs regarding assessment. The authors ask that you keep an open mind as you read the views of our colleagues, experts in the field of assessment, and think about the notion of commitment as it relates to assessment and teaching.

### Participants

This article summarizes the perceptions of 53 physical educators who attended a seven-hour workshop on middle school physical education assessment as part of a professional conference. One initial activity of the workshop was for the teachers to discuss assessment benefits and barriers. To facilitate this discussion, teachers were assigned to one of six random groups. The groups of teachers were directed to brainstorm, first about the benefits of assessing student learning and then about the barriers that prevent them from conducting assessments. At the completion of this activity, each group presented their responses to other participants in the workshop and openly discussed their ideas about assessment and the potential solutions to barriers they had identified.

Additional goals of the workshop included showing the teachers various ways to design rubrics, organize and manage assessments, and use student self- and peer-assessments in their classes. The workshop also included practical application using rubrics in dance and ultimate Frisbee. Overall, the workshop was designed to encourage middle school physical education teachers to review their current assessment practices and learn efficient ways to promote physical activity and implement assessment in their program.

### Benefit: Evidence for Grades

A “powerful form of accountability is assessment and grading” (Lund & Veal, 1996, p. 26). Students’ grades provide evidence of “the extent to which they have mastered learning objectives” within the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains (Kovar & Ermler, 1991, p. 13). The practitioners’ responses aligned with the experts, concluding that assessments provide evidence for grades. In addition, the teachers expressed that they valued having records or proof of how they calculated student grades. The clear connections that these practitioners made between assessment and the grading process included such statements as “helps with the grading process,” “maps out improvement,” increases “self-esteem,” “accurately measures skills and understanding,” “provides docu-

mentation,” and “sets forth expectations.”

The physical educators viewed assessment as a means of providing evidence of student learning. Since our society and schools value the notion of grades and ranking students, physical educators need to be able to justify the components included in their grading system. Hence, assessing student learning gives teachers the necessary information to support the grades that students earn.

### **Benefit: Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Are Related**

“Good teaching is inseparable from good assessing” (Wiggins, 1993, p. 21). The notion that assessment serves as a learning process for students, peers, and teachers was highlighted by Veal (1995), who said, “When assessment is part of the teaching and learning phase of instruction, its primary purpose should be to provide feedback to students and the teacher” (p. 15). The relationship has been described as a “three-way connection between teaching, testing, and learning; assessment can inform instruction” (Anderson & Goode, 1997, p. 48). Assessment of student learning provides teachers with information about their effectiveness and gives direction for future lessons (Dejong, Kokinakis, & Kuntzleman, 2002).

The physical educators at the workshop recognized that assessment can provide direction to their teaching and that a focus on student learning is one benefit of assessment. The teachers explained that using assessment “gives students starting and ending points” and also associated assessment with goals, expectations, and student awareness of their own progress. They acknowledged that assessing student learning could improve teacher performance, because teachers are able to learn more about the strengths and weaknesses of their students and their teaching. They also made comments related to adjusting teaching progressions and providing individualized instruction for students. In summary, the physical educators reported that learning occurred for “peers, teachers, and students” during and after assessments.

When students know they will be assessed, they often become more interested in the class activity, and their level of participation may increase. “Helping students monitor their improvement on a regular basis is also motivational” (Martin, Kulinna, & Cothran, 2002, p. 18). This increased interest and motivation may help students become active stakeholders and direct their own learning. Furthermore, assessment results can be used to make future lessons more interesting and challenging to teachers and students.

### **Benefit: Credibility**

The issue of justifying the importance of physical education is well supported in the literature. If physical educators want to remain a valuable part of school curricula, a new direction in assessment and accountability is imperative (Lund, 1992; Matanin & Tannehill, 1994; Rink & Mitchell, 2003). If physical educators can provide meaningful data regarding student progress, it will help to convince others of the contributions and value of physical education programs (Lund,

1992; Mustain, 1995; Rink & Mitchell, 2003).

In the workshop, justifying the importance of physical education came forth as a benefit of conducting assessments in physical education. As one group of teachers stated, “To keep your program, justify it!” Since statewide and local assessments are occurring in other academic areas, these physical educators believed that assessment in physical education gave credibility to the discipline, the program, and the teacher.

Another venue of accountability is the alignment of curricula with the national standards and local frameworks. The teachers mentioned comparing assessments and goals with the national standards for physical education (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2004) as another advantage. Also, using assessment within their teaching addresses district and state standards. In summary, the physical educators advocated, “Use your assessments to document that students are learning in your classes!”

Two trends surfaced from the feedback that the teachers offered. Despite knowing the benefits of assessment, the teachers were discouraged from the task of formally assessing student learning because of various barriers. They also voiced a common belief that assessment and grading are the same. These misconceptions are addressed in the sections that follow.

### **Barrier: Who Gets the Best Grade?**

The most common barrier listed by the teachers was the problem of assessing a wide range of skillfulness, summarized as, “Does the student who can do the skills get the best grade?” Awarding grades on the basis of ability has received mixed reviews. Experts have noted that grading in physical education should be based on achievement directly related to ability, identical to academic subjects (Kovar & Ermler, 1991). Physical educators are, however, apprehensive about grading based on “normative standards” because of the various maturity levels, fitness levels, and abilities of students (Matanin & Tannehill, 1994; Veal, 1988).

In addition to skillfulness, other responses indicated the concerns that teachers have regarding grading students based on physical disabilities, reading abilities, and language barriers. The previously stated barriers evolved into questions concerning the issue of grading. For example:

- “How do I use assessments in grading?”
- “What should I grade students on?”
- “What kind of grading system should I use?”

There are several strategies for overcoming this barrier. First, teachers must value and balance the cognitive, affective, and health-related fitness domains with the psychomotor when teaching, assessing, and grading students. Teachers should revisit unit objectives and identify goals that complement the psychomotor domain. Because psychomotor skill is only one of four areas on which a grade is usually determined, lower-skilled students can emphasize other areas such as knowledge, homework, teamwork, and affective attitudes that are important factors when calculating the

final grade (Lund & Kirk, 2002). Furthermore, the domains can be weighted differently for various units according to the expectations for each. For example, one unit could emphasize skill because that is the focus of the unit. Another unit may emphasize cooperation because that is its focus. Since the final grade reflects the total picture of how well students have met all domains, each student can excel at some area (Lund & Kirk, 2002).

Second, one may address the problem of wide ranges in skill and ability level by selecting a variety of units within the grading period. For example, dance might be coupled with a soccer unit, or an invasion game with a target game. More specifically, when an activity requires strength and speed to achieve success, teachers can pair it with another activity that requires other equally valued traits, such as balance or the ability to move to rhythm. When students are asked to demonstrate a variety of skills, a more balanced curriculum is achieved and a grade is not determined by any one motor skill characteristic but rather by a variety of motor skills (Lund & Kirk, 2002).

### **Barrier: Lack of Time**

Time restrictions, overwhelming record-keeping, and differing levels of departmental support are among the reasons that have been cited for not using assessment (Hensley et al., 1989; Hensley, Morrow, & East, 1990; Imwold, Rider, & Johnson, 1982; Veal, 1988; Wood & Safrit, 1990). The issues of inadequate time and lack of meaningful assessment were also noted by Griffin and Oslin (1990).

Time constraints and the negative effects of testing at the end of a unit were two reasons that the physical educators reported for not using written exams. These barriers are based on the notion that assessment is separate from teaching, thus reaffirming the need for a reconceptualization of assessment as an integral part of the overall learning experience.

These physical educators expressed that assessment occupied valuable time allocated for physical activity and movement. One physical educator commented, "That is what we're all about, physical activity," implying that the emphasis on physical activity is apparently of higher importance than assessment. Again, recognizing that time is needed to train students in conducting self- and peer-assessments, the teachers said that they preferred for their students to spend time moving during physical education classes.

These responses from the physical educators participating in this exercise are relatively familiar barriers. Part of the process for changing these attitudes should address how physical educators view assessment. For some physical educators, the word "assessment" is associated with students sitting down and completing a written exam (Worrell, Evans-Fletcher, & Kovar, 2002), or with students waiting for an opportunity for the teacher to observe their performance. This association equates with time away from physical activity. There are, however, several quick, informative methods of checking for student learning without sacrificing movement time.

Using practical assessment measures such as reporting process and/or product results on task cards can quickly check the students' level of understanding during class. In addition, homework assignments or projects outside of class time can be used as a cognitive assessment of students' learning. A homework assignment or project can be a valuable addition to a student's portfolio.

When using station work in class, integrate an assessment station after a high-activity station to give students a rest and a short time for assessment. Station work can also be used as a means of giving students optimum practice time while you remain at one station conducting the assessment. This is a practical method of integrating assessment into class without sacrificing movement time. Using the station-work model ensures that the teacher will assess each student that passes through the station.

### **Barrier: Too Many Students**

Overcrowded physical education classes that make it difficult for teachers to conduct traditional evaluation of students are a familiar, long-standing problem (Imwold et al., 1982). Physical educators also express concerns regarding lack of planning time and record-keeping as common problems in large classes (Worrell et al., 2002). The size of classes combined with teaching multiple sections and units makes assessing students seem unmanageable.

Thoughtful proactive management is the key to successful assessment. Developing a system that helps you organize your teaching and your workspace will aid in the task of record-keeping. Before administering the assessment, consider how you would like to access and record the scores. One method that may be helpful is to develop a master score sheet for each class. Class rosters could be downloaded into a selected computer program, or grades could be recorded into a separate grade book. Creating spreadsheets for recording student results in Microsoft Excel can make entering data less cumbersome (DerVanik, 2005; Wegis & van der Mars, 2006). Use personal digital assistants (PDAs) for note-taking or for entering data quickly during class (Juniu, 2002).

Another strategy for recording information is to make individual scorecards. These cards could be color-coded by squad or grade level. The scorecard system is advantageous because it gives students the opportunity to quickly record (and access) all their scores. Scorecard systems also accommodate quick transitions among testing stations, reducing the amount of "wait time." When classes are organized by colors that correspond to scorecards, students can return their assessments (and equipment) to designated places, alleviating the time-intensive task of filing.

Use the assessment instrument or scorecard as a tool for accomplishing other managerial tasks. For instance, place numbers or symbols on the corner of the document. Then use that information for taking attendance or transitioning students quickly. Another idea is to recruit older students in your school to assist in filing papers and/or checking to ensure each student has completed each assessment.

## External and Internal Barriers

Some of the challenges that the teachers mentioned can be classified as external, such as scheduling constraints and class sizes. Although teachers do not have as much control over these external challenges, an attempt to modify them is recommended. Physical educators can become involved by joining the scheduling committee at their school, and then designing and/or presenting a schedule to the principal or committee. While these external challenges may be addressed over extended periods of time, there are some short-term strategies that may help.

Continue advocating for smaller class sizes, but, in the meantime, use peer- and self-assessments in larger classes as feedback for students (Worrell et al., 2002), rather than for the sole purpose of grading. When conducting a teacher assessment, make quick notes about students who are not competently performing skills during practice sessions. Identifying errors in critical elements of skills alleviates the task of evaluating every student. Another method of assessing a large number of students is to assess eight or 10 students per day. Veal, Russell, and Brown (1996) recommended using formative assessment, focusing on a few skills per year and viewing them at different grade levels.

Although many external barriers may hold teachers back, physical educators can control several internal challenges, such as grading. In essence, teachers have the ability to make changes internally within their teaching environments by designing practical instruments, allocating time, developing a record-keeping system, and teaching students to become self-directed learners. Although teachers cannot control the grade-reporting system used at the school, they can control the percentage of the grade devoted to each of the four domains.

## Making a Commitment

Teachers make choices concerning how time is used and energy is expended. Teachers also have the option to continue with the way things are or to change the current situation. People's choices are based on their commitments. In other words, when individuals are deeply committed to something, they will take actions that are consistent with that commitment. Despite limited instructional time and a host of other barriers, many physical educators maintain a commitment to providing high-quality learning experiences for their students. This commitment enables teachers to make difficult choices about what and how they teach.

The first step toward implementing meaningful and manageable assessment is to examine the degree to which you are truly committed to initiating change. If you are not willing to make changes in your current assessment practices, take a look at what stops you from making those changes. Chances are that some of the barriers already identified will be recalled. If you are willing to make a commitment to implementing assessment practices, then take action by using some of the following suggestions.

## Develop Assessment Routines

The ways in which teachers choose to organize and manage assessment in physical education are as individual as the teachers themselves, yet there are some common characteristics that can be summarized. One suggestion from the facilitators of the workshop is to take the time to teach students how to conduct peer- and self-assessments. View the time that you take teaching students about assessment with the same importance as establishing your class rules. Establishing class rules takes time, but you would never consider leaving it out of your opening lessons. Hence, spending the initial time to teach students how to make assessments is time well spent. Begin by committing to selecting or designing one simple, meaningful assessment instrument that is practical. Use that assessment instrument for one designated grade level; the authors suggest the entry grade level at your school.

## Embed Assessment in Teaching

Teaching, learning, and physical activity do not have to stop for an assessment to occur. Assessments do not have to take place every class meeting or on one isolated day, typically at the end of the unit. Physical educators must view assessment as a vital part of their instruction (Hensley et al., 1990), rather than as an additional chore that produces a grade (Schiemer, 1996). Organize your classes and students so that assessment becomes a natural part of the teaching and learning process.

Select appropriate assessments that fit within the context of the lesson or unit, the allocated time period, the students' ages and abilities, and the number of students (Johnson, 2005). Design assessments that are easy to use and record. Ask yourself, "Have I maximized the information and minimized the paper?" Must it be a full-page "quiz" distributed to each student, or can it be an overhead or poster that can be used again? Commit to being highly organized, practical, and efficient.

## Use Assessments to Enhance Instruction

Be mindful that assessments must (1) lead the teacher to what follows; (2) re-teach; (3) challenge students with related, higher-level skills or tasks; and/or (4) move forward to introduce new skills and tactics. Similarly, assessment provides invaluable information for the student. Assessment can summarize what one knows, which skills need practice, and how to obtain the next level of proficiency.

In physical education, perhaps more than other disciplines, teachers are constantly making informal assessments. For example, while teaching students how to throw, a physical educator observes and gives feedback to students about how they can improve and about the elements of the skill that are correct. Effective teachers assess students continuously and adjust their lessons through their observations of students' performances (Jefferies, Jefferies, & Mustain, 1997). Physical educators offer daily instruction and skill development, yet some are missing an opportunity to gather information about their students' progress. Therefore, students are left wonder-

ing about their level of improvement or accomplishment in the class. "At the most basic level, assessment is used for student self-improvement and is performed daily during the student practice portion of the lesson" (Dejong, Kokinakis, & Kuntzleman, 2002, p. 24). Without assessment, there is a "missing link" in the chain connecting teacher effectiveness to improvements in student performance. After spending time planning, providing instruction, and refining skills, the assessment of student learning completes the experience for the learner and the teacher. As a physical educator, would you not want to know whether your students could throw properly before you progressed to the next skill? Commit to knowing when to move on or to re-teach skills and commit to providing your students with formal and informal feedback about their progress.

### Closing Thoughts

Perhaps part of the struggle is that professionals too often let the barriers discourage them from harvesting the benefits of assessment. Beyond simply planning lessons, teaching those lessons, and refining students' skills, it is time to *make a commitment* to integrate practical assessments into teaching. One way of reaping the benefits of assessing student learning is to simply take action!

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