Rethinking Adolescent Reading Assessment: From Accountability to Care

In this article, the author explores the balance of responsibility for effective formative reading assessment between classroom teachers and the curricular structure within which they work.

Transitioning from teaching high school English to teaching a ninth-grade reading support class while also participating in a multiyear inquiry project around principled reading assessment has led me to view effective, responsive adolescent reading assessment as an act of care. I use this word, in part, to help rehabilitate the concept of assessment by replacing its contemporary associations with mechanistic accountability with something more thoughtful and humane. But this stance is also informed by my core belief that when we care enough about our middle school and high school students, we stop looking for ways to work around the developmental gaps they have as readers with responses such as reading everything aloud, explaining what students should have read rather than giving them time to read it, or putting the most struggling learners in special classes (where they’ll be subjected to any number of commercial “interventions” with dubious outcomes for adolescents). Rather, when we assess out of care, we engage ourselves and our students in the challenging work of taking an inquiry stance, actively seeking to learn more about what they can do and addressing their needs directly, as best we can, in authentic contexts for literacy and learning.

I’m aware that framing effective reading assessment as an act of teacher care may have the unintentional, undesired effect of contributing to the dominant discourse around individual educator responsibility (read: blame) for meeting or not meeting the extraordinary challenges of elevating adolescent reading achievement. Let me clarify: I do believe that a teacher who teaches responsively, using assessment to match instruction and materials to student needs, is embodying care. I don’t, however, believe the logical opposite, that teachers who aren’t yet using formative assessment to its greatest advantage don’t care about their students. In my experience, teachers’ intentions and capacity for effective use of formative reading assessment are only as strong as the curriculum and resource structure that surrounds them, making the embodiment of caring assessment possible only when responsibility for student development is truly shared, distributed thoughtfully across multiple stakeholders. Consequently, I wish to theorize more fully the notion of inquiry-based reading assessment as an act of care and then suggest a model of four elements that distribute the responsibility for enacting effective assessment—from the teacher to course to system level. Doing so is, I believe, necessary to make the most of what we know about formative assessment in reading.

Reading Assessment as Care

When my high school English students struggled with the reading I assigned (because of lack of motivation, skill, or stamina—and probably a combination of the three), I routinely resorted to two of the responses I mentioned in the introduction: reading everything for students or telling them what they
Nel Noddings’s “Caring in Education” has helped me understand this situation and rethink how assessment can more realistically be seen as an act of care. Noddings separates the virtue sense of caring—saying we care and working diligently with our students—from the relational sense of caring, in which trust and rapport exist to the extent that students themselves see teaching acts as acts of care. In the example above, I was “conscientiously pursu[ing] certain goals for [my] students,” namely coverage of required texts and accumulation of English credits, perhaps getting at the virtue of care in Noddings’s sense. But I had certainly not adopted a relational sense of caring around competence in reading comprehension. For “a caring relation or encounter,” she contends, “the cared-for recognizes the caring and responds in some detectable manner. . . . A student may acknowledge her teacher’s caring directly, with a verbal gratitude, or simply pursue her own project more confidently” (2). In other words, for the act to be seen as caring, both the actor and the acted upon have to see it as such. This is a tall order for assessment, but before we hold ourselves responsible for getting students to thank us for an assessment, let’s focus our energies on the more manageable goal of ensuring that every act of formative assessment leads to more confident, competent performance of the tasks at hand.

Jerome Bruner offers us theoretical and practical means for bridging the gap to assessment as needed to know from the reading. At the time, I viewed these as caring responses. I knew that I couldn’t let them fail because of a problem I didn’t cause yet didn’t have the capacity to solve. But in expressing care only by preventing institutional failure while doing little to improve their ability to read challenging texts, I was doing as much harm as good.

The photo shows Scott Filkins and students, likely engaged in a formative assessment activity.
care. In his essay “Culture, Mind, and Education,” he writes that

the management of self-esteem is never simple and never settled, and its state is affected powerfully by the availability of supports provided from the outside. These supports are hardly mysterious or exotic. They include such homely resorts as a second chance, honor for a good if unsuccessful try, but above all the chance for discourse that permits one to find out why or how things didn’t work out as planned. . . . If agency and self-esteem are central to the construction of a concept of Self, then the ordinary practices of school need to be examined with a view toward what contribution they make to these two crucial ingredients of personhood. (38)

Bruner’s use of the term self-esteem, I realize, may bring eye rolls from educators who have lived through an era of making kids feel good about themselves whether they’ve achieved anything or not, but we need to look past the accumulated associations of that phrase to the wisdom he brings to formative assessment theory. Rearranging two of Bruner’s “homely resorts,” we get at the heart of what makes formative assessment work: timely, supportive feedback and always having another chance to use it. Offering students these gifts repeatedly is our best hope for increasing their competence at a reading task, and increased self-confidence will come along with it.

We know this from our own experiences and those with our students and children; for more concrete evidence, consider the conversation between Samson and his reading tutor, Erin, in Peter Johnston’s Opening Minds: Using Language to Change Lives (45–48). In this excerpt from Eric McCloskey’s dissertation, the struggling reader “keeps inviting [his tutor] to either make decisions for him or give him praise,” behaviors that we might engage in because we care about the student (45). Rather, the tutor consistently redirects Samson to his own cognitive and metacognitive resources that allow him to complete the task himself, making the interconnectedness of agency, competence, and self-esteem abundantly clear.

Samson’s response of continued productive struggle is what makes assessment a caring act in Noddings’s view. Good assessment, truly formative assessment, seeks to elicit a response of increased confidence from learners by informing instruction and transforming student learning and competence.

Noddings acknowledges, though, that there are numerous obstacles to establishing caring relationships that allow for formative assessment to work in this way. The framework I offer below is, in my view, a means of maximizing the potential for students to see assessment as offering them another chance and to experience assessment as being cared about.

Distributing Responsibility for Quality Formative Assessment

Through my attempts to develop capacity to assess well and in my work with middle school and high school teachers in my district, I’ve come to understand that while the individual, caring classroom teacher is essential to the process, that teacher or his or her own may not be enough. I offer here four essential elements to a formative assessment system that works with teachers’ individual efforts, which I will elaborate in the remainder of this article. To maximize the potential for formative assessment to support the development of adolescent readers, teachers need the following:

1. Principled reasons for assessing—namely, the belief that adolescents can improve and that teachers can help through informed decision-making
2. A strong knowledge base in adolescent reading
3. Multiple models of tools that give valuable information about students
4. A flexible curriculum/instructional framework, and diverse instructional materials that allow for response to what has been learned through assessment

While I’m not certain than any one of these elements is more important than the others, I have put them in the order that, in my view, suggests the progression from what might be considered teacher responsibility, or at least a teacher-centered concern. The list culminates with an element that should be considered a structural responsibility. Together, these elements (see Figure 1) represent a way
to capitalize on the care teachers demonstrate when they assess carefully and purposefully, supporting this crucial component with a structure that makes differentiated response a supported expectation.

**Element 1: Principled Reasons for Assessing**

In my teacher training, I was taught to assess to see if my measurable instructional objectives had been met through my planning and instruction. Early in my career, I assessed to generate grades to put in the grade book. Under this paradigm, my responsibility was to assign and teach and the students’ was to read and learn. I didn’t view myself as an active enough participant in the learning process, so assessment was an act I did to students at the end of learning rather than with them, all along the way. As I developed the other elements in this list (particularly tools that give access to students’ processes as they read), I started to understand that there was so much more I could do when I viewed assessment as my attempt to understand my students better as readers. Assessment “for a grade” would still happen, but later, less frequently, and for different reasons. Eventually, the primary reason I assessed was to help me know what I needed to do next (see the Joint Task Force NCTE/IRA Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing, particularly Standard 3, for more on this topic).

**Element 2: A Strong Knowledge Base in Adolescent Reading**

Middle school and high school teachers are fortunate to be working at a time in which understanding adolescent literacy has been made a priority by our professional organizations. We have never known more about the role of background knowledge, the nature of reading in the disciplines, and the importance of motivation for successful comprehension. Dipping into the vast and ever-increasing professional literature is an essential way to develop understanding of how students read, but there are two other sources even more at the ready: our own reading practices and the work and talk our students produce.

On your own (or more ideally with a group of colleagues), sit down with a short piece of challenging and unfamiliar text such as the first several pages of a Toni Morrison novel or an article from Science magazine on an engaging topic. As you read, try to become aware of everything that is happening in your effort to make sense of it (as suggested in Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris). Doing so gives you a sense of what happens (or should be happening) when students are interacting with difficult text. You’ll find yourself orchestrating a complex range of cognitive, metacognitive, and affective skills, strategies, and stances that—once you are aware and can name from your own experience—become both noticeable in student work and teachable to students.

**Element 3: Multiple Models of Tools That Give Valuable Information about Students**

As if it weren’t already, this list of four discrete elements definitely begins to blur at this point. After you begin to understand all you do as a confident and skilled reader yourself, you will want to look for ways to get your students to offer up such information about their processes, habits, and attitudes. The most useful tools for gathering such information are annotations of text (ideally as part of a more comprehensive literacy performance assessment) and one-on-one reading conferences with students (see Filkins, *Beyond* 18–51; Tovani 73–128).

A literacy performance assessment is, in the sense I use the term, a piece of relevant and engaging text surrounded with prompts for students to write about what and how they are thinking before, during, and after reading (see "Making the Reading Process Visible through Performance Assessment" at http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/making-reading-process-visible-30961.html). Asking students to generate background knowledge and set a purpose...
for reading not only gives you a sense of their competence in preparing to read a text, but it also actually prepares them to read the text. Annotations give insight into what students are connecting with, understanding, wondering about, or finding confusing while they are reading. Post-reading questions allow students to demonstrate overall understanding, confirm or clarify their expectations for the text, and share any other information they wish. Teachers can use this information to plan generally (targeted think-alouds or instructional groups), or if the excerpted text is from a larger piece students will actually be reading, they can target initial prereading or modeling activities to what all, most, or some of the students need to be successful.

Conferences can serve similar information-gathering purposes, although they provide the additional benefit of functioning as a site of embedded, individualized instruction. As students are reading their independently chosen books (or any other text), you can talk with students about how they’re preparing to read and how it’s going as they are working through the text. Conferencing seems daunting to most of us largely because we expect too much of ourselves at the beginning, hoping to diagnose a need and teach an effective response immediately. It’s important to take some of this pressure off and allow ourselves the professional dignity to “learn into” this new process by initially taking good notes and being satisfied with whatever new knowledge we have about students as a result of talking with them. The many nuances of effective reading conferences are beyond the scope of this article (see Tovani 105–28 for wonderful, practical advice), but even if teachers confer only to gather more information, when the last component of this framework is in place, there is time and space to respond to what they learn about their students as thinkers and readers.

Element 4: A Flexible Curriculum/Instructional Framework and Diverse Instructional Materials

Professional learning around formative assessment often stalls at the information-gathering stage. When teachers say, “I graded the exit slips, but I don’t know what to do next,” it’s time to look at whether the entire instructional environment is in fact designed to support (or, even better, to depend on) formative assessment. Unfortunately, traditional conceptions of the high school English classroom, to put it bluntly, were not designed to be responsive. The “ordered list” is the standard way to organize an English course: a list of novels, a list of genres, a list of strategies, and so on (see Applebee 67–81). The items on the list don’t matter as much as the list’s implied linearity and lack of flexibility—the semester- or yearlong experiences we teach are called courses for a reason. It’s the rigidity of this structural/curricular reality, often at odds with the efforts of the most caring and well-intentioned teacher, that prompted me to write this article with the aim of shifting the responsibility for assessing well from the teacher alone to a responsibility shared by teachers and the system within which they work. And it’s what served as the basis for a significant revision of English curricula in our district, an effort to move beyond “lists” as our organizational paradigm.

Informed by the work of Gay Ivey and Douglas Fisher and Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, our teachers have worked together to reorganize some of our English courses around key shared thematic understandings; consequently, texts and strategies can now be taught as the flexible and responsive components of the courses. We still have lists of strategies to teach and lists of books and texts to offer, but we simply don’t follow the list as if the students don’t matter. Rather, what we learn about students through annotations, conversations, and other means helps us know what to model for students and to guide them to (and through) topically related texts that will best meet their needs. By rethinking what is essential for all students (here, the understandings about identity in ninth graders and culture in tenth graders) and what is flexibly determined and differentiated based on information from assessment (here, what they read and the support they are given to read it), we have seen promising growth in the classroom and in externally imposed assessments in courses that were formerly defined by flat (or negative) achievement progress.

Putting It All Together

The work involved in approaching any one of these components—rethinking reasons for assessing building a knowledge base, creating new assessment tools, and developing curriculum that takes differences as a given—is significant. Addressing all of them at once, which is exactly what
our district did when faced with the realities of too many kids entering and leaving our high schools significantly under-engaged and underprepared, was the kind of work that couldn’t be sustained merely by the hope for improvements on externally mandated tests.

Rather, the motivation for us all comes from exactly the sources I mentioned earlier, but in reference to students: agency and self-esteem. Assessment, when enacted out of teacher care and supported with a system with integrity, fuels the feelings of competence and achievement for both students and teachers. As Noddings puts it, “caring implies competence . . . teachers in caring relations are continually pressed to gain greater competence.” When teachers recognize that it is their informed decision making that leads to increased student achievement, the value and rewards of their efforts to assess thoughtfully become plainly obvious.

At a time when prominent policymakers behind standards and assessment in our country wish to impart to students that no one cares what they think and feel, teachers, curriculum coordinators, and professional development providers need to work together to offer a less cynical, more constructive counternarrative. What better way than to take the word assessment back from such power brokers? While our students may be taking tests of increasing technological sophistication on shiny new laptops, we can know we’ve done our significant part by employing the most “homely resorts” of formative assessment to support the literacy development of the learners in our care.

**Note**

1. I’m thinking specifically of Common Core “architect” David Coleman’s widely reported message to young adults that “(A)s you grow up in this world you realize people really don’t give a sheet [sanitized thusly in the official transcript] about what you feel or what you think” (3).

**Works Cited**


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