

EXPANDING ASSESSMENT LITERACY: A PITCH TO AMERICAN PUBLISHERS¹

W. James Popham

University of California, Los Angeles

Two missions are undertaken in the following essay. Mission One is to convince readers that the *single most cost-effective* way to improve our schools is to increase the assessment literacy of concerned clientele. Mission Two is to invite American publishers, chiefly those who publish books or journals dealing with educational testing, to participate actively in promoting a nationwide expansion of assessment literacy.

In turn, then, attention will be given to each of these missions—with the hope that readers of this analysis, having concurred with Mission One’s stress on assessment literacy’s importance, will support Mission Two. As indicated in its title, the following paragraphs constitute an unabashed plea for American publishers to become meaningfully involved in a formal effort to promulgate increased assessment literacy.

The “concerned clientele” to be reached in this effort to promote expanded assessment literacy include practicing educators, particularly the teachers and administrators who run our schools. However, others who could benefit from expanded knowledge about educational testing include policymakers such as legislators and school board members, parents of school-age children, and members of the general public. Finally, students themselves could benefit from learning more about the types and applications of today’s educational tests. This is because, increasingly, test-based decisions now have a serious and sometimes irreversible impact on students’ lives—both during school and long after it is over.

What’s Assessment Literacy?

What, then, is this “assessment literacy” that is at the heart of this analysis? Does someone need to become a full-blown measurement specialist (that

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is, what's known as a "psychometrician") to possess assessment literacy? Happily, such is not the case. Whether we refer to educational tests as "assessments," "measurements," or "exams," the requisites for *bona fide* assessment literacy are far less demanding.

Although modest differences can be seen in the way that various writers define assessment literacy, their chief conceptualizations are similar. Presented below, for example, is the definition of assessment literacy I have been employing for more than a decade, and that I will be using in the following analysis:

Assessment literacy consists of an individual's understanding of the fundamental assessment concepts and procedures deemed likely to influence educational decisions. (Popham, 2018, p. 2)

Let's consider, briefly, the most important ingredients in this definition.

First off, we seen that to be assessment literate, a person needs to understand certain measurement-related *concepts and procedures*. The requirement for assessment literacy, then, is not to be able to carry out certain procedures or to implement particular conceptualizations but, rather, to *understand* the essential nature of those concepts and procedures. Moreover, the needed understandings are neither expansive nor exhaustive. Rather, the understandings necessary for assessment literacy are those that are apt to have a direct impact on educational decisions.

Depending on the nature of the specific target audience under consideration, of course, we might encounter modest differences in the collection of essential assessment-related concepts and procedures to be understood. For instance, what a school principal needs to know about the reliability of high-stakes accountability tests will differ from what a high school sophomore should know about the reliability of college-admission predictor tests. On balance, however, the similarities of the key assessment-related understandings that various clienteles need to know about educational measurement are substantial.

Cost-Effectiveness—A Nontrivial Consideration

It is generally conceded that the U.S., as is true with many nations, wants to improve its schools. But if the procedures proffered for improving America's schools are basically unaffordable, such proposals constitute little more than wistful yearnings. Implementable school-improvement strategies must be cost-effective. Otherwise, such improvement strategies should be left to those preferring fantasy-based yearnings rather than actionable realities. We need real-world ways of improving our schools.

To illustrate, if we were able to *dramatically* boost teachers' salaries, we would soon see many more of our most able college graduates opting for classroom careers. Would the nation's schools improve? You bet they would. But our society seems unwilling to underwrite the substantial cost of such a school-fixing strategy.

Similarly, if we could *substantially* reduce the number of children each teacher must teach, then the resultant student-to-teacher ratios would permit far more student-differentiated instruction by classroom teachers and, consequently, lead to far better educated students. But, once more, the unaffordability of such a fix would nix the deal. Our society, at least for the moment, would not finance such a fiscal boost in support of school improvement.

In contrast to the considerable dollars required to carry out either of these sure-winner improvement ploys, let's see why the promotion of assessment literacy could have a positive impact on our schools, yet do so for an affordable price tag. First, we can look at the "effective" aspect of the "most cost-effective" claim seen in this essay's initial paragraph.

Because many of today's most important decisions about the ways we educate our youth are made on the basis of students' test-score performances, it is obvious that we need to be using the correct tests when generating those scores. Indeed, consider the most recent edition of the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Tests* (American Educational Research Association, 2014), the preeminent set of test-development and usage guidelines issued by America's three associations most concerned with educational tests. In those court-influencing guidelines, it is stipulated that a test must be accompanied by evidence supporting a test's intended

use. Indeed, if evidence corroborating a test's intended purpose is not present, then assessment validity is simply not present should attempts be made to base educational decisions on the test's results.

Because essentially all of today's *evaluative* uses of educational tests in judging instructional quality are made using tests *unaccompanied by convincing evidence* that students' scores on a test accurately indicate the caliber of instruction, then many serious mistakes are certain to be made because of the questionable validity of test-based interpretations. Such mistakes will see ineffective schools regarded as winners and effective schools as losers. The real losers from such test-based mistakes, of course, are our children.

In contrast, a hoard of solid research evidence now exists, and has existed for more than two decades (Black and William, 1998), that if teachers employ classroom tests to make decisions about whether to adjust their ongoing instruction—or to help students decide whether to adjust their own learning tactics—huge increases in student learning will result. Yes, an assessment-literate individual will understand that this classroom use of status-monitoring assessments—referred to as *the formative-assessment process*—can have a whopping impact on improving students' learning. Indeed, one research-reviewer reports that, when used appropriately, formative assessment can *double* the speed of students' learning (William, 2013). Yet, because the cost of implementing this research-ratified test-based way of better instructing students is modest, our failure to employ it more widely constitutes another serious assessment-based mistake—a mistake less likely to be made by assessment-literate educators.

If we make the truly trivial monetary investment required to expand assessment literacy, this could definitely help American educators avoid the many serious measurement-based mistakes often encountered these days. Not only could educators dodge the two super-significant mistakes described above, that is, using unproven evaluative tests and under-using classroom formative assessment, but they could also avoid many less serious test-based mistakes. Clearly, the cost-effective dividends of greater assessment literacy is downright alluring.

Hopefully having achieved, at least to some degree, the first mission of this essay, namely, emphasizing the cost-effective dividends of enhanced assessment literacy, we turn to Mission Two. This second mission is a proposal for enlisting the publishers of assessment-related books and journals to take part in formal solution strategy that would not only help improve the nation's schools, but also would be regarded as a socially responsible public-relations initiative on the part of American publishers.

Message Multipliers

It is claimed in the initial portion of this analysis that expanded assessment literacy will help improve our schools. It can do so by heading off mistaken evaluative decisions based on use of the wrong tests. In addition, increased assessment literacy can alert educators to the striking instructional payoffs of ongoing classroom assessments when used formatively. The issue to be considered in the concluding part of this analysis is not *whether* expanded assessment literacy can help improve our schools but, rather, *how* to bring about an expansion in assessment literacy. The focus here, then, is how to transmit assessment-literacy information to the several clienteles who, abetted by greater assessment acumen, could help reduce assessment-fostered educational mistakes.

To get underway with an exploration of how to promote the acquisition of assessment literacy, we first need to consider from whence the information about educational testing's fundamental concepts and procedures currently emanates. Fortunately, we see some modest increases in the number of states requiring assessment coursework in their teacher-licensure programs. The textbooks in those pre-teaching or pre-administration courses clearly can engender greater assessment literacy on the part of the students enrolled in those classes.

Although, in fairness, it must be conceded that some of those textbooks are slathered with more psychometric esoterica than is needed by most clienteles. Moreover, a number of professional associations appear to be engaging in serious efforts to promote their members' assessment literacy. Happily, we continue to see the publication of new books and journal articles clearly germane to the promotion of readers' assessment literacy.

Recent books by Stiggins (2017) and Connelly (2018), for example, supply state-of-the-art views regarding the realities currently transpiring in U.S. educational testing, and what *could* transpire if we became truly bold. Along with others, I have written a “Basics” textbook about educational testing (Popham, 2017b). Yet, despite any modest long-term optimism we might have, the reality is that the sort of information necessary to promote greater assessment literacy is currently not reaching sufficient numbers of people.

Although we could identify tactics that, if implemented skillfully, could enhance the assessment know-how of one or more relevant groups, what we need desperately today is a potent *multiplier mechanism* by which we can reach many, many people. To address this need, I believe publishers of books and journals dealing with educational assessment could supply the grist to make our assessment-literacy mills purr. The remaining paragraphs represent a modest attempt to encourage executives of American publishing houses to take part in such an effort—solo or in collaboration with their publisher colleagues. Those publishers, of course, can be influenced to join such an effort by their authors and by their readers—even those who read an analysis such as this.

Copyright rules are important and eminently useful. If a publisher (or, in some instances, an author) does not have some form of protection from infringement by others, then a published book or article could be legally scavenged without penalty. Yes, having been on the receiving end of occasional royalty checks over the years, I am a huge fan of copyright protection.

Although the Fair Use sections of the U.S. Copyright Act indicate that small segments of a copyrighted work, or even the entire work, can sometimes be used for noncommercial or educational purposes, even zealous proponents of expanded assessment literacy will sensibly be reluctant to become involved in potential copyright infringement litigation. Accordingly, copyright notices must be crafted so that a publisher (or author) grants use of a segment of a copyrighted publication for explicitly delineated educative uses only. The sort of language I have in mind is “For the explicit promotion of assessment literacy” or some similar phrasing. Yes, I am suggesting that

authors be encouraged to identify relatively short segments of a book or an article that would be made available to anyone for use in the promotion of greater understanding regarding assessment literacy. Indeed, in most instances, these copyright-released segments would have been written from the very get-go with assessment-literacy promulgation in mind.

The purpose of these copyright-released segments would be to *make it easier for readers* to reach others in the promotion of assessment understandings—and, thereby—spread the word about educational assessment’s most important understandings. For instance, suppose that while a middle-school teacher completes a master’s degree course in educational assessment, she encounters a terrific treatment of techniques for reducing assessment bias in teachers’ classroom tests. The teacher wishes to apprise her faculty colleagues about these techniques. Fortunately, the textbook being used contains a dozen one-page segments intended specifically for such a purpose—one of them addressing bias-reduction procedures. A quick trip to the school’s copy machine followed by a visit to the school’s faculty mail room and the deed is done. No wall to climb; no moat to cross. Easy!

Particulars Explored

I am not a publisher, of assessment related books or journals—or of anything at all. As a consequence, I know naught about the particulars regarding how such a make-available arrangement would be implemented. For example, the specifics of the copyright notice appended to, say, half-page description of the “Standard Error of Measurement” would need to be accompanied by a copyright notice granting the use of that segment for exclusive purposes of educating others regarding the concept being treated. The specific phrasing of the copyright notice would need to satisfy the attorneys of the publisher granting the copyright exception. Most importantly, however, the language of the copyright notice would need to be inviting, not off-putting. The whole idea here is to make it easy for, say, readers of a book to relay an author-identified (and publisher approved) segment to another person or group.

Given that these days we must cavort everywhere on a digital dance floor, it would be imperative to make an electronic version of any such *assessment-literacy messages* (ALMs) available—typically from the publisher’s website or elsewhere. Again, I am out of my depth in such determinations, but hard-copy *and* digital versions of all ALMs would both seem necessary if this approach were to have an optimal impact.

Likely Audiences

Who would be the recipients of an ALM? Remembering that the individuals deciding on the audiences for these assessment-literacy messages would typically be the readers of an assessment-related book or article, diverse potential recipients are possible. The choices of target audiences would be those of the individuals who had initially done the reading. Let me illustrate with a real-world example of how this proposed promulgation strategy can work.

In August of 2018, ASCD will be publishing a book I wrote promoting six essential understandings associated with educational assessment (Popham, 2018). In the final chapter of that book, I wrote four mini op-ed essays (roughly 700 words), each dealing with what I regard as a significant assessment issue facing educators and others. I was delighted when the publisher agreed to allow readers of the book to use the mini essays for purposes of promoting assessment literacy. This would be, to my knowledge, the first tangible example implementing the strategy being proposed herein.²

To whom would an educator who has read an assessment-related book send an op-ed essay (written by someone else) advocating, for instance, the greater use of the formative-assessment process in the nation’s schools? Here are a few likely contenders (1) local town or regional newspapers, (2) a school’s faculty or district’s administrators—possibly followed up by an open meeting to discuss the issue described, (3) parents of a school’s or district’s students—again, potentially followed by an in-

² I should note, also, that Pearson officials are currently considering my request to make the next edition, that is, the 9th edition of *Classroom Assessment: What Teachers Need to Know*, (Popham, 2017a) feature the kinds of assessment-literacy messages described here. I hope that they agree to do so.

person meeting on the topic treated, (4) legislators or school-board members—accompanied by a personal note encouraging their reading of the transmitted op-ed essay, (5) friends and colleagues—with the suggestion that, if those individuals are interested in doing so, they could themselves relay the essay to others. Many distinctive dissemination tactics and audiences are possible, of course, and would best be identified for the specific context at hand.

Although the example given above deals with full-blown, albeit abbreviated essays, much shorter ALMs are possible. Indeed, one can visualize books or articles containing terse, pithy treatments of such topics as “The Precision of Educational Measurement” or “Common Confusions Regarding Reliability.” Brief, clear explanations of key assessment concepts or procedures can do a world of good if read—and used—by the right people. Nor need an ALM be limited to words-only explanations, a variety of video or audio options now exist, and could be skillfully inserted into a set of ALMs if the publisher were willing to underwrite the cost of such options.

It is important for publishers to recognize that, were they to undertake this sort of action, the costs need not be prohibitive. In many instances, the cost of reproducing relatively brief ALMs could be truly trivial.

A Worthy Effort

A marvelous marketing advantage can flow from a publisher’s taking part in a program along the lines being recommended. The message perceived by most people will be that a publisher who volitionally makes copyright-released assessment-literacy messages available to readers is a publisher who cares about the quality of our nation’s schools and the job they do for our children. This is not a repugnant perception to promote.

A branding dividend of considerable significance sits there—waiting to be chosen and employed. A variety of subtle ways exist for publishers to let the world know of the good works they are doing—not in the interest of making more money but, rather, of helping the nation’s children be better

educated. An advertising agency does not need a green gecko spokesperson to peddle that message effectively.

Possibly, a group of publishers who were interested in following the sorts of suggestions set forth here might prefer to work together in collaboratively crafting the best ways to identify and provide ALMs for inclusion in their books, not only in devising comparable copyright notices, but in working with their authors so that, as an intrinsic aspect of their ongoing authorial effort, the writing of suitable ALMs by authors could be encouraged. However, as indicate earlier, I know squat about publishing, so perhaps collaboration would be regarded unfavorably in this instance. Thus, a publisher who really gets going on this sort of mission might well pick up some serious branding advantages by being seen as the “company that cares.”

A New Breed of Emissaries

I do know, however, that from the perspective of the reader of an ALM-containing book or article, those who were relaying such messages would, in all likelihood, become even more familiar with the topic being addressed than if no such ALMs had been included. Thus, from an instructional perspective, the inclusion of effectively written ALMs would enhance, not diminish, the impact of the ideas an author intends to present.

What is being proposed, as you can see, is that we enjoin America’s publishers of educational assessment content to actively promote the creation of a whole new collection of measurement messengers. And that, by providing them with an array of effective assessment-literacy messages, we help make their efforts more successful. The consequences of this activity, in time, would be the enhancement of key constituencies’ assessment literacy. From the perspective of increasing our schools’ effectiveness, this would be a really good result.

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