

Commercialization, Proliferation, and Incoherence of Assessment

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Introduction

As identified in my brief paper on barriers to successful design, implementation, and long-term maintenance of balanced and comprehensive assessment systems¹, one category of barriers is commercialization and proliferation of assessment, leading to incoherence among components of an assessment system. Within that category, I identify three specific barriers as follows:

- Misleading but persuasive marketing materials for “silver-bullet” products claiming that an assessment (or the system as a whole) can be simultaneously good, fast, and inexpensive leading to commercialization at the expense of educator expertise and assessment appropriate to intended purpose and use.
- Marketing materials identifying a new need and marketing a new product to meet that need leading to both commercialization and proliferation of assessments.
- Turnover or changing priorities among policymakers leading to proliferation of new assessments through a failure to evaluate whether an existing assessment can be eliminated or can serve the perceived new need.

I elaborate on each of these barriers below, discussing how each is a barrier, and offering some tentative strategies to address the barriers, with a healthy dose of “why should I think I can identify potential solutions to problems that have thus far proved intractable.”

Misleading Marketing Materials Advertising a Silver-Bullet Assessment Product

How This Constitutes a Barrier. It is no secret that marketing materials can exaggerate or even outright fabricate the capabilities of products being sold. I have followed this issue with some interest since my dissertation in 2004. In my dissertation and some later work, I documented contradictions between claims about the qualities of commercial assessment products made in marketing materials and much more circumspect and even outright contradictory statements made in academic literature by employees of the commercial entities marketing the products². This misleading marketing has of course continued, and can be seen in two assessment with marketing materials claiming or strongly implying that the assessments have all of the following characteristics³:

- They cover the complete K-12 range in reading, mathematics, and science.
- They are aligned to idiosyncratic state content standards, the common core of state standards, and the Next Generation Science Standards.

¹ Martineau (2018).

² See Martineau (2004, 2006), Martineau et al. (2007), and Martineau, Wyse, and Zeng (2010).

³ See Scantron (2018a, 2018b) and Northwest Evaluation Association (2018).

- They precisely identify where on the entirety of the 13-grade scale each student’s achievement is currently located.
- They precisely identify the degree of academic growth each student exhibited both within and across grades.
- They qualify as *formative assessments*⁴ that are instructionally useful in the way that practicing *formative assessment FOR learning* is useful.
- They require less than an hour to take (per subject area).
- They are less expensive than other assessments that make much less expansive claims.

These misleading marketing materials can result in inappropriate commercialization of assessment with considerable downstream effects. Those effects include a reduction in local educator expertise in assessment, supplanting the practice of *formative assessment FOR learning* with *assessments OF learning*, and inappropriate assessment (i.e., a mismatch between intended purposes and use and the type and characteristics of assessment).

Potential Strategies to Address this Barrier. I offer three possible strategies for addressing this barrier. The first is to develop a coherent and consistent assessment vocabulary of assessment that undoes much of the fragmentation of assessment vocabulary⁵ and make a concerted attempt to lodge the new coherent and consistent vocabulary in the lexicon of all areas of the assessment community. It would be necessary to develop the new vocabulary in such a way that it addresses types of assessment, characteristics of specific assessments or assessment practices, purposes and uses of assessment, and the types and characteristics of assessment that are matched to specific purposes and uses. Successfully completing this first strategy would make it much more difficult to craft persuasive but misleading claims because the types and characteristics of assessment could be easily compared with the claimed uses and purposes for mismatch. My attempt to start development of a coherent and consistent vocabulary can be found in two additional papers for this conference⁶.

The second strategy is to develop a complete and well-specified theory of action (TOA) and to make a habit of deliberately referring back to the TOA when making decisions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment⁷. By making a habit of referring back to a high-quality TOA in combination with the new vocabulary of assessment, it should be relatively easy to identify when claims about an assessment product are misleading.

The third strategy is to engage in a concerted effort to provide professional learning opportunities and coaching in more than just basic assessment literacy (see strategy 1). The more assessment literate the stakeholders in the system are, the less likely they are to be swayed by misleading marketing materials.

⁴ Note the “s” on the end of “formative assessment” as an indicator of misleading marketing.

⁵ Another barrier identified in Martineau (2018).

⁶ Martineau and Dadey (2018) and Appendix A of Martineau (2018).

⁷ An incomplete theory or action, a poorly-specified theory of action, inattention to the theory of action, and failure to consider the theory of action when modifying the assessment system are additional barriers identified in Martineau (2018) based on the work of Chattergoon and Marion (2016).

Marketing Materials Identifying a New Need and Offering a Product to Fill the Need

How This Constitutes a Barrier. Marketing materials may identify a legitimate new need and offer a product that legitimately fills that need. They problem can come in the following forms:

- The new “need” is unimportant in the context of a high-quality theory of action.
- The new “need” is insufficiently important to add to the existing assessment system.
- The “new” need is already addressed in the system but is called something different.
- The new need that could reasonably be filled with an existing component of the system

Potential Strategies to Address this Barrier. The strategies offered for misleading marketing materials are also appropriate for evaluating a proposed new need and the proposed product for filling that need. I suggest setting up a multistep standard operating procedure for adding any component to the assessment system:

- In the TOA and in the district assessment system design documents, clearly identify all intended purposes and uses of the assessment and the types and characteristics of assessment used to fulfill each intended purpose and use.
- When considering an addition to the assessment system, carefully review the TOA and system design documents specifically looking for overlap between intended purposes and uses and the new identified need.
- Only if it is determined that the new identified need is indeed new and is indeed a need, carefully consider whether it is sufficiently important to justify a change to the assessment system.
- Only if it is determined that the new need is sufficiently important to justify a change to the assessment system, carefully consider whether any existing component of the system can reasonably fill the need.
- Only if it is determined that the new need cannot reasonably be filled with an existing component of the system, consider whether the advertised product, any competing product, or a district-developed product offers is the best fit for the assessment system.

Turnover or Shifting Priorities Among Policymakers

How This Constitutes a Barrier. Elections, resignations, hiring, termination, and promotion can lead to considerable turnover amongst policymakers at all levels, who can bring with them considerable shifts in policy priorities. Changes in political climate can also make untenable what were previously acceptable policies and practices.

Potential Strategies to Address this Barrier. The strategies for addressing the previous two barriers may be helpful in this regard. Having a cadre of stakeholders who are knowledgeable about the theory of action underlying the assessment system, share a coherent and consistent assessment vocabulary, and possess advanced assessment literacy will be more resistant to shifting priorities, more articulate in communicating their concerns, and more persuasive in internal and public dialogue about the assessment system.

However, because policymakers often respond to different pressures than front-line educators, the cadre of stakeholders would need to have deep understanding and an ability to concisely and clearly

communicate the rationale for the existing system, how shifting priorities could damage the system, and how one might develop compromises that maintain coherence, a sound (if changed) TOA, and efficiency⁸.

References

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⁸ The three defining characteristics of a balanced and comprehensive assessment system as described by Chattergoon and Marion (2016).