

Reflections on Reconceptualizing Assessment to Improve Learning

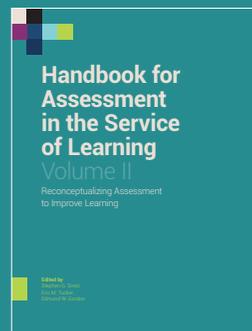
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The chapters in this Volume II of the *Handbook of Assessment in the Service of Learning* illustrate why the volume is subtitled *Reconceptualizing Assessment to Improve Learning*. This reconceptualization involves multiple facets of assessment from development through results reporting and highlights the shift from tests that measure status, to assessments that focus on engaging and supporting learners. The authors in this volume interrogate traditional models of developing tests, assessing students, and reporting information, and build upon that foundation to envision new approaches that expand assessment's capacity to inform and improve learning.

Rather than privileging one goal over another, this reconceptualization invites a broader framing—one where assessment serves both the advancement of learning and the need for fairness, evidence, and technical rigor. For if the purpose of assessment is to serve learners, test design, development, administration, and feedback must focus on that purpose. As these chapters illustrate, for assessments to truly serve learners, they must be flexible and multifarious, acknowledge the wide range of learners to be served, and embrace that diversity through design. Assessment design that serves learners will employ many methods such as game-based designs, portfolios, and personalization. The design will also include proven methods that draw from self-regulation principles, culturally responsive assessment, and learner engagement.

Validity in this paradigm is more than statistical tests; it encompasses evidentiary usefulness for teaching and learning, fairness, and the consequences of use—asking whether assessments *help* learners learn, and requiring evidence of that learning. For educators and test developers, that means engaging with learning

communities to design authentic tasks and report results in clear, diagnostic, and actionable ways—moving from opaque scales to feedback that informs next steps in a useful and usable manner. For policymakers, it calls for systems that privilege classroom-embedded assessment cultures and participatory co-design, and embrace policies that privilege understanding, support learning environments responsive to learner variation. The work ahead is clear: our field must invest in building tools, capacity, and enabling environments so assessments in the service of learning have the potential to be realized for learners, educators, and families.

The Promise of a More Humane, Learner-Centered Assessment

In the 1950s, while Professor Edmund W. Gordon served as an educational psychologist at the Pediatric Clinic of the Jewish Hospital of Brooklyn, he worked closely with Else Haeussermann, a special educator whose practice reshaped his understanding of assessment. Haeussermann was uninterested in sorting children by scores; she sought to understand *how* they learned and the conditions under which they succeeded (Gordon, 2020; Gordon, 2025). Together Haeussermann and Gordon studied learners' adaptive strategies—the moves children made when tasks were clarified, chunked, modeled, or connected to their experiences. Haeussermann's approach defied the conventions of test standardization and was deemed too labor-intensive, yet it represented a foundational model of assessment in the service of learning (Gordon, 2025). Their reports documented these patterns and their instructional implications, and Haeussermann translated the findings into concrete, individualized lesson plans (Gordon, 2020). That collaboration affirmed a principle Gordon never abandoned: in pedagogy, the primary purpose of assessment is to inform and improve learning, not merely to certify status (Gordon & Rajagopalan, 2016).

This journey is, at its heart, a commitment to honoring the whole learner (Armour-Thomas et al., 2019). It requires educators to become designers of rich learning environments, test developers to prioritize instructional and learning value in addition to psychometric elegance, and policymakers to foster systems that trust and invest in the professional expertise and capacity of educators.

Ultimately, the powerful and hopeful message of this *Handbook* is that the tools and frameworks we design are secondary to the humanistic vision that guides them. The final measure of any assessment's worth is not found in a score report, but in the confidence, curiosity, and competence assessment processes inspire in a learner.

Conclusion: Toward Assessment in the Service of Learning

Taken together, the insights from Volume II point to an education system where assessment serves learning. By acting on these principles, assessment will become a powerful engine for learning (Hattie, 2009). Volume III explores working examples and actionable blueprints for assessment in the service of learning.

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