

## Language, Rationality, and Assessment

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IT IS my belief that we are not very effective in assessment because we are not very effective at formal communication. If I make such a claim and then support it (in *my* communication with you) with fastidious reasoning; if I cite just the right number of illustrations and speak with clarity and persuasion—then I weaken the claim. To support my claim that language is our shortcoming I will commit certain ambiguities of expression, I will violate some conventional definitions of terms, and I will read these unending passages in a mesmerizing drone. If I am successful, you will emerge from our afternoon session unable to recall a single confrontation with Truth. You will be convinced—as you have been at many a conference—that “Words Forever Fail Us”; which, of course, is my point.

Several years ago I was dismayed by the consternation shown by some experts in our field about the distinction between measurement and evaluation. As far as I was concerned the differentiation was an instance of “nit-picking.” I said, “Measurement implies evaluation. Testing just is not testing unless there is test interpretation. No ‘assessment’ occurs without an underlying intent to generalize.” I have joined the “nit-pickers.” Now I rally to the distinction. I want us to think of “something more” when we think of evaluation. I want us to think about the desirability of a student’s response as well as the quality of a student’s response.

And there is a second distinction. Most of my colleagues think of evaluation as measurement of individual student progress, but I want to focus some evaluation on individual school progress, and some on individual nation progress. I think it is important to define

evaluation differently than would most measurement specialists. My hortatory working definition goes like this:

*As evaluators we should make a record of all of the following: what the author or teacher or school board intends to do, what is provided in the way of an environment, the transactions between teacher and learner, the student progress, the side effects, and last and most important, the merit and shortcoming seen by persons from divergent viewpoints.*

I see a useful distinction between measurement and evaluation. Am I able to make a useful distinction between measurement and assessment? I like to think of assessment as one form of measurement. Going along with Jum Nunnally (1959), I say that assessment is direct measurement, in contrast to psychometric testing, which almost always is indirect measurement. Assessment, as represented by the National Assessment Project (Tyler, 1965), pertains to direct measurement of performance on important reference tasks. Both psychometric testing and assessment are useful techniques for gathering information.

### Curriculum Evaluation

Here I am going to talk about something broader. I will discuss inquiries into the worth of any instructional program. Such inquiries depend on direct assessment, on objective testing, and on subjective judgments. I will call such an inquiry: evaluation. If what I call “evaluation” is much different from what you call “assessment” then perhaps I should retitile this paper: “Language, Rationality, and What I Call Evaluation.”

Ralph Tyler has done a magnificent job of describing the multiplicity of evaluation roles. One of the distinctions most helpful for understanding a theory of evaluation, I believe, is the distinction Mike Scriven (1967) makes between the *roles* and the *goal* of evaluation. The goal of evaluation is always the same: to determine the worth of something. The roles depend on *what* that something is and on *whose* standards of value will apply. A student’s performance can be evaluated by those considering his admissibility to advanced training. That is one role for evaluation. A million student performances can be evaluated by persons concerned about a nation’s academic curricula. Competing textbooks can be evaluated—that is, their relative merits can be examined. Environments

