

ASSESSING ADULT LEARNING: A GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS

Joseph J. Moran. (2001). Krieger Publishing Company, Malabar, Florida, 187 pages.

At first glance, individuals teaching in the field of adult education would pick up Joseph Moran's book, *Assessing Adult Learning: A Guide for Practitioners*, with great interest. Many literacy practitioners, community instructors, or other educators teaching adults are always seeking ways to assess students and to teach them how to enhance their own learning while still promoting the principles of adult education. Therefore, when adult educators examine the table of contents and read "Understanding the Basic Principles of Informal Assessment," they think: "Finally, oh, good!"

Moran promises that informal assessment activities will assist both educators and learners to become involved in the evaluation process. Moreover, he maintains that when educators do this, their students will become more interested and empowered in their learning through the feedback they receive on evaluation. In this second edition, Moran stresses that focusing on practical techniques of assessment is essential. He emphasizes the importance of using a planning grid, similar to that of Angelo and Cross to schedule student assessments. According to Moran, this helps educators integrate learning activities, behaviors, and progress, in relation to thinking, academic and discipline specific knowledge skills, liberal arts values, work preparation, and personal development. Moreover, the grid charts students' progress in learning over time. Furthermore, Moran provides some practical ways to evaluate students through more traditional means, such as test taking while "requir[ing] learners to display what they know about the task" (p. 94) because "the more a learner is assessed for completing a 'real-life' task the more likely it will be considered a performance assessment" (p. 95).

In addition to discussing how to design traditional tests and performance assessments, Moran highlights how educators may use and assess portfolios to illustrate learners' skills and goal achievements. Before ending the book, Moran explains how to apply assessment holistically to adult basic education, GED, workplace, community education, higher education, continuing professional education, and self-directed learning. Moran concludes this

second edition by maintaining that the principles of informal assessment cut across all areas of adult education.

Having a book focusing on informal assessments of adult learning would be particularly beneficial for the field of adult education. Many practitioners, especially, seek ways to assess student learning that is not punitive, that does not bring up unpleasant and unsuccessful past memories of learning in formal settings, and that involves students. Additionally, a book of this type could help instructors and professors in higher education as they compete with the TV, video game, computer savvy, volunteer generations' interest and attention in their classrooms.

An important intent of this book is to include adult learners in the assessment process. Also, as previously mentioned, Moran seeks to cover a wide range of adult learning from literacy, adult basic education, and GED to community education, workplace to higher education, and finally self-directed learning.

Unfortunately, Moran's desire to focus on all adult learners in a myriad of settings is part of the problem with the book. In doing so, he has trouble meeting the needs of educators in settings other than higher education. This is because the book is supposed to focus on "informal assessment conducted by an educator with assessment instruments developed by the educator for the specific purpose of facilitating learning" (p. 2), which is in actuality, formal assessment. From the outset, instruments and tests are discussed in great detail throughout the book, as is designing and marking these types of evaluations. Although attempts are made to differentiate between paper and pencil tests, assessment activities, formative and summative evaluations, portfolios, and self-directed learning, they tend to focus on formal grading for institutional marks. Even when Moran discusses performance assessments of "real life tasks," he talks about how this can be conducted on a paper and pencil examination. Also, "one of the goals of this book is to prepare learners to become proficient in assessing their own learning achievements, activities, and behaviors" (p. 3); however, this is glossed over by the emphasis on formal examinations.

Generally, multiple choice questions for textbooks can be found through test banks accompanying course materials produced by publishers. Most instructors tend not to ask students to help construct essay questions or other test items. Learners certainly could be encouraged to discuss how to assess tasks or portfolios; however, in the description of these sections, learner involvement in the assessment was not obvious. Some of the testing

procedures would bring back negative memories for literacy learners, even some in higher education. The book starts out by challenging adult educators "to refine their skills for assessing learning informally...that is to improve learning" (p. 2). However, the book actually focuses on formal assessment, not informal in the sense of actually increasing student learning and self-assessment, while promoting self-worth.

Overall, aside from the summaries and links to the subsequent chapters, the book was similar to a laundry list of items to be discussed. From the beginning of the book, a focus was needed as to the purpose of the book, and at the beginning of each chapter, a clear outline would have been helpful to guide the reader. Chapters often seemed to overlap in content often while continually attempting to make the case for "informal" assessment that was, in reality, just another name for testing.

Perhaps a more updated and extensive bibliography would have focused the book more. For example, at a quick glance, a few of the following publications might have been helpful for the author: *How Do They Know They Know? Evaluating Adult Learning* (Vella, Berardinelli, & Burrow, 1998); *How To Teach Adults* (Draves, 1997); *Principles for Assessment of Adult Learning* (Kasworm & Marienau, 1997); and *Assessing Adult Learning in Diverse Settings: Current Issues and Approaches* (Rose & Leahy, 1997). This would have prevented an over-reliance on the few selected sources in the reference. Despite Moran's valiant attempt to synthesize "informal" evaluation in one volume, adult educators would best be advised to seek other sources to help them with this topic in order to involve their learners with informal assessment in a meaningful way.

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