Who Is in the Business of Assessment in Education?

Martha Osei-Yaw

New Jersey City University

More and more businesses are rapidly delving into what is commonly known as the education sector. Creating partnerships with educational institutions can be quite lucrative for up and coming businesses which is one of the reasons why the education arena has become so popular. With so many businesses and entrepreneurs trying to jump on board, now more than ever, it is essential for school leaders to make informed decisions about the choices they are making and the impact it will have on student achievement.

Let’s Go Learn is one of organizations that has made a niche in the area of online individualized diagnostic assessments. According to Let’s Go Learn, the company has administered over 4,000,000 math and reading assessments worldwide (Let’s Go Learn, 2000). The assessment solutions include the Diagnostic Online Reading Assessment (DORA) for K-12 students, the DORA Phonemic Awareness assessment for struggling readers and the DORA Spanish/EDELL. The Spanish/EDELL component has been designed as a means of assessing and comparing the student’s language acquisition skills in both their native language and their second language.

The Adaptive Diagnostic Assessment of Mathematics (ADAM) is the comparable math version of the online assessment in K-7 which is aligned to the Common Core State Standards. Additional diagnostic assessments include DOMA for Algebra and pre-Algebra. One of the benefits of the Let’s Go Learn products are the data reporting tools for both DORA and ADAM. The summary reports are user-friendly and include a variety of strategies and skills that teachers can further develop in the classroom. There is also a parent companion piece which provides an in-depth report highlighting their child’s strengths and challenges.

There are numerous other businesses that are competing in the online assessment market including Edmentum. Edmentum, the parent company of Study Island, is a leading provider in online learning solutions. Most recently, Edmentum’s Study Island won the Software and Information Industry Association’s 2014 CODiE Award for best Student Assessment Solution. The product provides the ability for educators to instruct and assess students as they prepare for state-specific standards. In addition, the Edmentum suite offers programs designed to intervene with individualized support for Response to Intervention (RTI). Personalized learning options are also available for students with special needs, as well as, English as a Second Language Learners (ELL). What makes Edmentum unique is the ability to design web-based solutions that are differentiated to meet the learning needs and styles of individual students. Such products for individualization include virtual learning, one-on-one learning solutions, blended learning and personalized learning.

Not all assessment driven educational companies have tapped into the field of online testing. Some businesses have chosen to maintain a hands-on approach by offering demonstration lessons, in class support and coaching, instructional materials and software systems. Standards Solution is one of those companies that have taken more of a traditional approach to formative and summative assessments. The services that are offered prepare teachers and students for New Jersey’s standardized assessment known as the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC).

For the most part, the Standards Solution consultants are hired to work directly with the instructional staff and the students in order to expose them to the grade-level rigor embedded in the Common Core State Standards and the PARCC. Numerous professional development opportunities are offered from a preset menu of options. Many of the professional development opportunities are geared towards using assessments to enhance student learning and to guide instructional practices. A variety of test prep workshops and demonstrations are also available to choose from as part of their offerings.

One of the disadvantages to the Standards Solution services is that the formative and summative assessments are generally taken in a more traditional format using paper and pencil. Although the company exposes the teachers and students to balanced assessments that are aligned to the standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics it does not afford the students with the opportunity to complete those assessments online. By not exposing the students to the online tools and resources that are mirrored in the PARCC, the students are at a disadvantage even if they have the content knowledge. Some of the schools that have hired Standards Solution have had to include additional training to support not only the students, but also the teachers, with becoming familiar with the online tools associated with the PARCC.

 Formative assessment tools can be quite beneficial since the data can be used to scaffold support and increase reading proficiency levels. The Developmental Reading Assessment, 2nd Edition Plus (DRA2+) is a benchmark assessment which measures each child’s reading proficiency level through systematic observation, recording and evaluation of performance (Pearson, 2015). The program features a four step process as part of the evaluative method which includes observing the habits of the individual reader, analyzing and recording oral reading, evaluating the child’s level of comprehension and assessing the results to personalize instruction.

The DRA assessments are developed as part of a classroom tool kit which includes all of the necessary materials such as the teacher’s guide, student books, a training DVD and assessment folders. The most recent version of the DRA which is known as the DRA2+ includes an App that teachers can use with an iPad to assess student progress. The formative assessments can be used to determine the individual student’s guided reading level in grades K-5 and are also aligned to the Common Core for English Language Arts.

Another product that can be utilized to record formative assessments in the early years is known as the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). DIBELS are designed by the Dynamic Measurement Group with the ultimate goal of identifying children experiencing difficulties with the acquisition of basic early literacy skills in grades K-6. The product is comprised of seven measures to function as indicators of phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, accuracy and fluency with connected text, reading comprehension and vocabulary (Dynamic Measurement Group, 2015).

One of the advantages of the DIBELS assessment tool is ability to tap into diverse sectors of the population. Formative assessment tools have been designed for Spanish-speaking students (IDEL), native French speakers (IDAPEL) and Pre-K students (PELI). DIBELS Math will also be available beginning in 2015-2016. The program will focus on several components including universal screening and monitoring of at-risk students in grades K-6.

 Businesses and organizations continue to compete for a piece of the educational pie in order to add to their profit margins. In an era of high stakes testing, teachers and school leaders across the country are facing insurmountable pressure to prepare students to succeed in standardized tests. As the need to perform well increases, schools are faced with the challenge of increasing student achievement at rapid speeds and educational businesses are more than willing to offer the magic potion to make it happen. Now more than ever, instructional leaders need to step back, assess the overall needs of the students and maintain a comprehensive approach to curriculum and instruction.

References

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