

Two sides of the same coin: authentic assessment

Steven L. Berg

Dr. Berg is Assistant Professor of English and History at Schoolcraft College in Livonia, Michigan.

Dr. Jon Mueller is a professor of Psychology at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois.

Dr. Paula Harris is a professor in the Department of Language, Literature, and Arts at Jackson Community College in Jackson, Michigan.

Interview with Jon Mueller

Berg: Thank you for talking to us about assessment. What is the big concern about assessment today?

Mueller: It is interesting how we have been giving a lot of attention to assessment at the K-12 level for a number of years, but it is really starting to hit the college level more recently. Primarily that is coming from the increased desire for accountability. And so colleges are feeling the heat from accrediting agencies to demonstrate that students are actually getting something from their education. You need to measure it and assess it and provide evidence that students are meeting these outcomes. We are being told that we are to start doing what we should have been doing all along—identify the student learning outcomes, the important things that we value, that we think that students should come away with. And then find effective ways to measure outcomes to demonstrate that students are actually getting this value from their education.

Berg: Don't grades do that? They can show that a certain percentage of students passed a class and a certain percentage didn't.

Mueller: That has been the argument for years — that we assess and we identify within our classes what our outcomes are and grade based upon that. But I think a lot of the push comes from all

these surveys where we find that graduates or adult Americans are lacking in many skills and certain areas of knowledge, so people have questioned whether seat time in a class is really a good measure of this; can we really be confident that students are getting the value added in education or acquiring the knowledge and skills that they need for work and life just because they passed and received that diploma? So many people are questioning and want more direct evidence showing that they can actually do these things and know these things rather than just a transcript.

Berg: As I am sure you're aware, on the day this interview is taking place, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings is having a press conference dealing with some of these issues. We don't have access to what she is going to say. But I would like to know what the people who are pushing assessment at the national level are asking educators to do that they are not already doing?

Mueller: They are asking us to do very reasonable things that, in fact, many of us as faculty have not been doing—at least not systematically. And that is, first of all, spelling out and articulating clearly what my goals are for my students, both across the curriculum and across the college, both within my individual discipline and even within my individual courses. Unfortunately, if you ask many faculty to show you a list of their student learning outcomes for their course or for their department, many will not be able to present those to you; they haven't been articulated sufficiently yet. So that is the first step we are being asked to do. It is a reasonable step. We should be able to articulate exactly what it is we want students to know and to do once they graduate.

Berg: Is there anything else?

Mueller: Then they are asking us to come up with meaningful measures which will demonstrate that students have met these particular outcomes or goals we have written. Don't just tell me "Here is the way I grade them." Directly tie your assessment to the outcomes. Show me that if students did well on these particular assessments that will provide good evidence that they have met those particular outcomes.

Berg: I could see someone say that we have course objectives. Aren't the clear goals our course objectives?

Mueller: They can be. And in some cases they are. For years, some faculty have spelled out course objectives or goals or whatever they have called them. However, many faculty still have not.

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- So I can understand some faculty saying “I am already doing that.” It is true that many faculty are. But it is also true that many faculty have not been doing that.
- Berg: *In one of my first steps to tie assessment to the course objectives, for a final project I asked students to react to each of the course objectives and explain how they met them during the semester.*
- Mueller: Yes.
- Berg: *I discovered that our course objectives were incomprehensible.*
- Mueller: It is not an easy thing to do—to write good course objectives. We were not trained in writing objectives. Unfortunately, even if you look at teacher education programs for individuals who are going out in the K-12 level, many of them—even though they have gone through four years of training—were not adequately trained to do assessment. Those of us who teach at the college level received even less training. So it is one thing to say that I have written objectives. It is another to say that I have done them well. More importantly, even if I have good objectives, many times the assessments I give—the assignments and tasks—don’t match up with those objectives and are not really tapping into whether students have met them or not.
- Berg: *If a department were to start that process today, what can it do to make sure that it gets good objectives?*
- Mueller: There is not one easy path. First of all, throw out what you have been doing to this point. Don’t think about your text book and what else you use. Sit down and have a conversation with your colleagues and ask what you want students to come away with. What is really going to best serve students in terms of what is supposed to follow: getting into graduate school, engaging in work, being a good citizen, whatever you think the goals are you are trying to serve? Sit down and brainstorm what you really value; what you think is most important. Then you can start looking at other documents.
- Berg: *What about looking at objectives from other colleges?*
- Mueller: I would not go to other departments’ lists or some national list, but have internal conversation about what is most important. Too often, lists of objectives get written by asking “What are the key concepts in our discipline and let’s just write those down?” Or, “What have other people said?” without significant reflection on what you value. Then, I would say, seek some information about what a good outcome or standard
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or objective looks like so that when you start to turn your vision into words you are writing them clearly in an observable, measurable way. You do not want to write incomprehensible objectives, but clear, simple, straightforward objectives that really capture what you value. That is when you need to turn to an outside source on how best to do that. Also, the last thing I would say is "Keep it simple." Pick out the objectives that are most essential. Don't make long, long lists and write out everything that you teach.

Berg: When my colleagues in the history department were doing this last year, some argued for a geography component and I don't know anything about geography. Although I am open to learning new things and new techniques, I could see this as threatening. It's hard to admit that you don't know something. So how can we be sensitive to peoples' fears?

Mueller: Well, again, there just has to be honest conversation. Before you start saying "you must do this," you need the honest conversation about what students need to know. The conversation then comes around to, "I have to admit that the students really need to know geography before they finish the course" and you read some consensus around that. Then it will be easier for faculty to say, "I don't really know geography that much" or "I'm not really incorporating geography in my courses that much" but I just heard and participated in this discussion and it makes sense and we all bought into it. So, what can we do to make it work? Let's make it meaningful and manageable. The meaningful part is that we decided it is important for students to know geography. Now let's make it manageable. "I'm not really doing much with geography right now. How can I start small with that?" You shouldn't just dive right in and cram a lot of geography into everything you do. You need to start small.

Berg: Going into fall semester, I added a geography component in my online discussions knowing it was probably inadequate. But it was OK to start there knowing that I was willing to continue to build geography into my course?

Mueller: That is definitely a great way to start. If you had gone the other way and tried to add a lot of geography to begin with, your students would have ended up worse off.

Berg: Why would they have ended up worse off?

Mueller: Because of two things. One, you would be taking away from things you were already doing well and that are also important.

But, more importantly, you would be pushing the geography faster than you would be ready to present it. Therefore, the quality of what students were getting would not have been at a sufficient level. And it would not have adequately met the needs of those students. It is hard to just jump into something completely new without sufficient practice and preparation. That goes for teachers as well as students. You are going to prepare them better starting small and doing it well.

Berg: *I have seen the phrase “authentic assessment.” What is the difference between authentic assessment and the assessment educators were doing 10 years ago?*

Mueller: The contrast that I make is between “authentic assessment” and “traditional assessment.” By traditional, I am talking about primarily objective testing: multiple choice, true/false, matching. Traditional assessment has been very common in our system for a long time. There is still some value in traditional assessment for measuring whether students have acquired a certain body of knowledge. When I want to do that, tests are a good tool to turn to. But, typically, I am more interested in learning if they are able to use that knowledge in meaningful ways. Tests are not as effective at that as are other forms of assessment. The authentic assessments are tasks that we give students in which we ask them to apply their knowledge and skills in meaningful, real world ways.

Berg: *Do you have some examples of authentic assessment?*

Mueller: Authentic assessment is not new. What is newer is more of an emphasis on it. These are things that teachers have been doing. Products that students produce or papers where they apply knowledge are examples of authentic assessment. Writing letters to the editor, writing research reports, writing an analysis of arguments that politicians have made are things that students will need to do in the real world and we can ask them to do that now in the classroom. Authentic assessment can include performances. Art has been doing authentic assessment when instructors ask students to perform in an artistic setting. We can observe students doing laboratory work or engaging in other tasks in which they actually apply what they learn. Sometimes people mistake authentic assessment with applying some big project or big task. But authentic tasks can be very simple things. In the real world, I am often called upon to perform small tasks that are important. For example, if I encounter a claim presented in the media, an important skill is to evaluate that claim and the evidence that

is presented to support it. Do I have that ability? We can ask students in class to do the same things. We present them with a claim and then ask them to evaluate it.

Berg: *Later today, I will spend about 20 minutes presenting research strategies on how students can find certain types of material. Then, I am going to ask them to find those materials in the library. The assessment at the end of the class period is whether or not they have a printout in their hands. Would that be authentic assessment?*

Mueller: Yes it would. Is that a real world task for them to find useful, relevant information? Yes it is.

Berg: *It is also immediate. If a student did not understand what I was trying to teach or if I taught the lesson poorly, that will surface because the student will not be able to do the task.*

Mueller: Definitely. Again, that is a nice distinction between traditional and authentic. If a student gets a multiple choice question wrong, you have little idea of why the student circled the wrong answer. Even if they circle the right answer, you have little idea of how they arrived at it. What does it mean about what they really know? It is hard to tell. But if students write a simple paragraph in response to some prompt, you can get a much better idea about what they are thinking. You can more easily identify their strengths and weaknesses.

Berg: *What is the value of using a rubric?*

Mueller: A rubric is a scoring scale in which you first identify the characteristics of good performance on a task. Those are called the criteria. So if you are going to ask students to write a persuasive essay, you ask "What are the characteristics of a good persuasive essay?" Those become the criteria; those are the things on which you are going to judge the paper. That is obviously subjective. So to make the subjective judgment more objective and consistent and reliable, you need to articulate what are the possible levels of performance for each of those criteria. A rubric contains those two elements: a set of criteria and the levels of performance for each criterion.

Berg: *A colleague was telling me that he was using a writing rubric to give feedback to his students. He has found that when students get feedback on the rubric, he no longer gets questions such as "Why was this a 'C' paper?" The questions are more, "Why didn't you think my introduction was strong?" This has made a better learning process for the class.*

Mueller: Exactly. That illustrates another value of the rubric. All of us have been in classes where we got back a grade that we didn't quite understand. We went up to the teacher and asked "Why did you give me a 'C'?" The teacher says "You didn't do this and this and this" and you wonder "Why didn't you tell me ahead of time that I had to do this and this and this?" That is what teachers do with rubrics. They don't typically just use the rubric to evaluate work once it comes in; they show the rubric to the student even before they begin the work so that the students know what the teacher is looking for. By sharing the rubric, students know the criteria; know what the requirements of good performance on the task are. You communicate the rubric clearly at the beginning of the process and you use the language consistently when the students are doing the work. Then when you evaluate the work, you use the same language and criteria you told the students you would be looking for at the beginning. Using rubrics creates more consistency of language and judgment throughout the process.

It is work up front which scares some people. That is why I always say, "Start small." Create a simple rubric with a small number of criteria. But once you have created that rubric and get used to it a little bit, it becomes much easier to apply it and comment on it.

Berg: *What advice would you have for an individual faculty member who was given course objectives developed by others, a faculty member who wants to do authentic assessment?*

Mueller: My first piece of advice is the one I mentioned before: start small. Particularly if this is really new to someone, just pick one outcome from your course and ask, "How could students really show me well that they have met the outcome? By the end of the course, what is a real-world, authentic way they could show me that they have met this objective?" Then start designing an assessment—a task—that would ask students to do this realistically. Then work backwards from there. Where in the course is it appropriate to assign this? Then, ask "How can I help students do well on this assignment?" I don't want to just say, "This is due in six weeks. Go figure out how to do it." I also want to give them some practice along the way on the parts of the task.

Jon Mueller's text, *Authentic Assessment Toolbox*, can be found online at <http://jonathan.mueller.faculty.noctrl.edu/toolbox>.



Interview with Paula Harris

Berg: *Thank you for taking time to talk to us about assessment. Why is there such concern about authentic assessment?*

Harris: I will use your discipline as an example. Students can say back to a history teacher: "I know when this happened. I know what that event was. I know what this date was. I have the information; I have this knowledge." A standard, traditional assessment would check for that with tests or papers or classroom conversation. Authentic assessment takes us beyond that. Authentic assessment goes higher up on Bloom's taxonomy and deals with analysis and evaluation where students can actually show in some real world situation that they can understand and synthesize the information they reported and know.

Berg: *So if I am going to teach my students geography using contemporary issues, giving them a map and asking them to label Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan is not sufficient.*

Harris: Right. Using your example, that would not be sufficient because you might also want them to know how those borders came into being, how those countries were created in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and how that creation affects the politics of today.

Berg: *In the history department, we have added geography as one of the objectives for our courses. To properly assess geography, it would be better then to ask students to explain how the boundaries were set and not to ask them to simply identify the countries on a map.*

Harris: To know the boundaries, they really need to know the why behind those boundaries. Also, when doing a project, students are synthesizing information. They are not simply recording it in a private writing or an exam situation. They are taking that information and creating something with it and then they are sharing outward.

Berg: *What do you mean?*

Harris: Writing itself can be a type of authentic assessment. But it would require students going through a process of researching and revising and getting peer feedback and then coming up with a final paper. Whether they presented that paper orally

or not is something that a teacher would decide. Either case would be an authentic situation. Writing can be authentic assessment. But you are also looking for a performance element in authentic assessment. Think about science labs. Science labs have always been authentic assessment because students are given a real problem which they have to figure out how to solve. I think that other disciplines—English or history, for example—have been slower to come to that type of performance based assessment and evaluation.

Berg: *A week ago we were together at the LAND Student Scholars Conference. Rather than just have students submit their papers this semester, I could make the assessment more authentic by giving the students the guidelines to submit their papers for next year's conference.*

Harris: Exactly. Because they are also getting validation outside of your classroom and experience outside of your classroom. Perhaps they are also working in a team which would be part of that, so they are doing investigation and performance and writing, too. They have an audience outside of you and it helps them develop all of those higher level skills. When you are on the job, typically you are not producing information just for your boss. It is going to go somewhere else for some purpose.

Berg: *Students who understand their audience are going to be the students who perform best at work.*

Harris: Absolutely. I want to say one other thing about why we are doing this assessment. I think we also need to go a step beyond the classroom, even to legislative levels because legislatures—such as Michigan's—are trying to tie funding for schools to assessment and outcomes. If we aren't categorizing and classifying and focusing on student learning outcomes we are going to lose funding, and that is something that is beyond the control of a classroom teacher. So whether you like the idea of assessment or whether you think we should be doing it or not, we are going to be required to do it or we will lose money. That is a less pleasant aspect, but it is a real one. And I am not sure it is much different than that real world situation we are asking students to fit into. Faculty need to participate in real world situations, too.

Berg: *I would rather work with my colleagues to develop good assessment techniques than to have the legislature tell me what to do.*

Harris: I don't want legislators involved in my classroom any more than they have to be.

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- Berg: *But don't we need to consider the outside world when writing course objectives and designing assessments?*
- Harris: Yes we do. Our board of trustees establishes associate degree outcomes: the skills that students should have when they graduate from Jackson Community College. That is a board mandated issue. We tie our assessments to courses for those associate degrees. We have the college mission statement. We have the departmental mission statement. We have the associate degree outcomes. Then we have the specific outcomes that our specific courses will address. This is a multilevel task and all of the pieces fit together.
- Berg: *You have been doing work with your colleagues in the English department looking at your courses and discussing assessment. What process did you use?*
- Harris: The first stage goes back probably 15 years when a small group of faculty in our department started sharing students' work with each other for evaluation purposes. We felt the idea of having a portfolio for every one of our students in every one of our composition classes was important. That portfolio would be evaluated by someone in the department other than the student's teacher. At the end of the semester, we started to exchange portfolios with other English teachers—both full time and adjunct. That was the first portion.
- Berg: *If I were to read a portfolio from one of your students, would my evaluation be the grade that the student received?*
- Harris: Your evaluation would be the grade the student received on that portfolio. Then that portfolio grade would be some percentage of the student's final grade. We typically recommend 30%-50% for the percentage given to the portfolio. There are some variations but they are not big variations.
- Berg: *What is the reaction of your students?*
- Harris: We have students who are sometimes uneasy. This is particularly the case when students transfer from another institution and did not take their first composition class here. They say things like "Why is someone else evaluating my portfolio?" or "Why isn't my teacher in charge of my grade?" My response to that is "Your teacher is responsible for your grade and has the ultimate say." We have also developed criteria for getting second readers, for appealing the grade students receive on their portfolios. There are ways to deal with situations that might arise where there is some disagreement.
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- Berg: *If a faculty member were to say, "I don't want you grading my students." Part of that could be ideological—they are my students—but some of it could be fear.*
- Harris: That is truer for our part-time teachers because they do not have the protections that full-time faculty might have. Also, they are concerned that the assessment of their students' portfolios is really an assessment of their teaching.
- Berg: *How do you deal with that?*
- Harris: We've worked very hard to make that not true. We established a composition workgroup that includes all full-time faculty and representative part-time faculty. We developed a standard course description with student learning outcomes to which we all agreed. We developed assessment criteria. We also developed a success table to report results of individual classes. We take that information in aggregate form so individuals do not need to worry about being identified.
- Berg: *What if faculty don't want a particular colleague reading their students' portfolios because they don't think that person has the same criteria that they have?*
- Harris: That has come up where a teacher thinks "Not that professor because he's too hard or she is too easy." We have to negotiate all of that all of the time just below the surface. We do that by setting up a method for exchanging portfolios where we don't swap portfolios with just one other person. Instead, I would take a portion of your students and a portion of another professor's and a portion of someone else's.
- Berg: *It seems that if you are meeting on a regular basis, there should be less and less swing where someone is being too hard or too soft.*
- Harris: That is exactly right. We have also developed a rubric for evaluating portfolios. This required very long and interesting discussions about how to score a portfolio: what should have highest priority, how do we subtract points. We come to an agreement and have printed up that material and share it with every person who is teaching composition. We've done what I think is an excellent job of coordinating among full-time and part-time faculty and sharing the information. We have a common textbook, and all people who teach composition must use that textbook. We do not have a common syllabus; we would prefer not to do that.
- Berg: *You mean a standard syllabus where everyone teaches the same*
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thing on the same day?

Harris: Yes. We have standard course objectives and we have the portfolio evaluation which has standards for grading. But we want to protect the creativity and the academic freedom of the individual faculty members by allowing them to create their own syllabus and to get to those skills and those outcomes in the best way they can.

Berg: *That makes sense. My understanding of authentic assessment is that it does not mean a cookie cutter approach to teaching.*

Harris: Exactly right. If I have a creative project in my composition or my lit classes and I have students doing research and writing papers and doing presentations, I might also ask them to have a visual component or an artistic component representing something they have learned by studying this writer or doing this research. I have had students “performing” in different ways by creating an artifact. Those artifacts might be things like simple posters or an audiovisual presentation of some kind. I have had students create videos themselves. One woman made a quilt. She was writing about nineteenth-century women writers.

Berg: *In the journalism class I am teaching, the dean has contracted us to do a public relations job to advertise some of the liberal arts department. My students are doing photo essays that will be displayed at a college wide event.*

Harris: That is exactly what I am talking about.

Berg: *That is authentic assessment because it is real world, and we can tell whether or not the students did a good photo essay. They are probably more apt to do a good job because we view it as being real and important.*

Harris: And because of the public nature of the event.

Berg: *What are some fears that people had when you were starting to introduce authentic assessment?*

Harris: One is the fear that I have already mentioned—that we had a hidden agenda not to assess students but to assess the teaching that was taking place in the classroom, that somehow the assessment would be a reflection on me and my teaching. People were also—and some are still—afraid if they go public with what they do in a classroom that they may be criticized. I think that many teachers have a hidden complex—I’m not sure what to call it—a hidden fear that they are not really as good as oth-

er people. Edward P. J. Corbett said he got up every morning and looked in the mirror and thought, “Corbett, you fraud.”

I think that teachers carry that around. Every day is a test for me as a teacher. Am I going to do as well today as I need to do? Are my students going to go out and talk about this class as a success or a failure? What are my colleagues going to think about me? I think many people who go into college teaching are actually true introverts. They come to this profession because of the love of the discipline and are not so accustomed to stepping outside the classroom where they have had control and going into a more public arena.

Berg: *When I tell my students that, by nature, I am very shy, they laugh.*

Harris: Exactly right. I think that happens to many of us. It is as if when you walk into a classroom something gets turned on and you become that academic, that teacher, that coach, or whatever you are. Then you walk out of the classroom and go into your office and close the door.

Berg: *In the history department, we have just looked at our course objectives and are now beginning to collect best practices to share with each other. In the process of doing that we will be talking about authentic assessment. I don't know how to teach geography well. My thought is that if I am willing to say that and no one is faulting me; then, it will be easier for my colleagues to say, "I need help with technology" or "I need help with this or that."*

Harris: Ego is always an issue. I don't know if that is something that is unique to academics or if everyone everywhere feels this kind of threat. But I know it is an issue. One way we have tended to circumvent that is through our composition workgroup or our literature workgroup where we truly gather and talk in a very personal way about what we are doing in the classroom. “What assignments are working?” or “Did you try this?” or “Let's collaborate on that.” or “What assignment are you using to achieve this?” As a result, we have had much more open conversation. I don't know quite what has made that happen, but the fact that we have a workgroup and meet on a fairly regular basis has opened people up a little bit to the discussions.

Berg: *That makes sense because you have a supportive environment.*

Harris: It doesn't mean that we all agree on everything or that there are not moments when you don't want to share. I think we are human beings and all human beings have moments when

they do not feel secure in revealing something publicly. But I think, on the whole, that this method has really worked for us and is continuing to do so.

Berg: *Recognizing that there is more than one approach, the fact that a colleague takes a different approach doesn't make them better, just different.*

Harris: Also, we can share those experiences. I can share my success not as, "This is the way that everyone has to do it," but this exercise worked for me on that day in that classroom. On the flip side, I can say, "I can't make this work. Why can't I get this? What is going wrong with that particular kind of assignment in my classroom? Why can't I get students not to write a summary but to write an analysis?" Things like that.

Berg: *What happens when there are disagreements?*

Harris: When we have had a disagreement about one of the courses or how to grade the portfolio, we continued to talk until we could come to some type of temporary agreement. We would recognize that there is a disagreement, but we will go with this agreement for this year and see how it works. Then, next summer, before we start in the fall again, we will re-consider.

Berg: *We just adopted a common textbook in our World and American History classes. The agreement was that we would adopt the textbook for one year and then see how it works. That is both for the textbook itself as well as the idea of having a common textbook.*

Harris: We have been using the *St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, and we adopted that book as a unit to use in both semesters of composition. Students purchase the book once for the whole year. We have recommended readings from the textbooks for Comp I and recommended readings for Comp II so that students are not repeating. But teachers have some leeway in how they approach the different assignments.

Berg: *I like to use film in my courses. From what you are saying, there is no reason why one could not incorporate film.*

Harris: I do the same thing. I have my Comp II students watch a movie and write an analysis of the film. Not everybody in composition does that. Someone in another section might use a piece of literature such as a short story or essay and then do the same summary/analysis assignment.

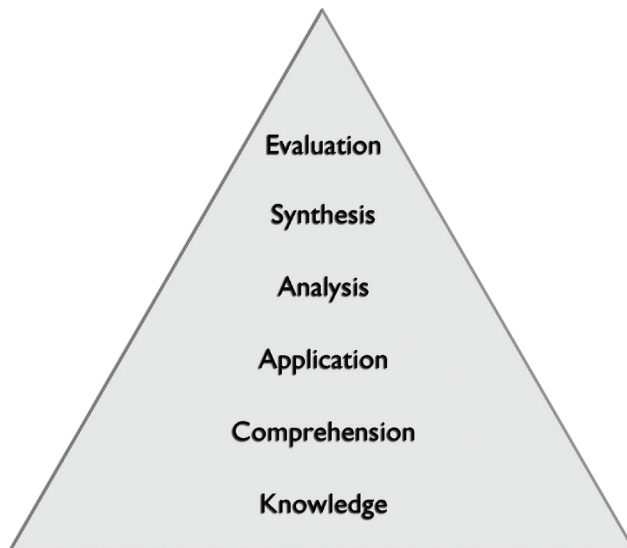
Berg: *It seems that because you are using a rubric and looking at student outcomes through authentic assessment it makes it easier to pro-*

mote academic freedom. We can do any quality lesson we want as long as students are learning the material.

Harris: Or any new and creative way of getting to the final objectives that work.

Berg: *The question is not "Is this film or piece of literature good or bad?" The question becomes "Are the students learning the material?"*

Harris: That is exactly right. You have the authentic assessment and the common objectives. All students will learn the difference between a summary and an analysis. How the teacher gets to that is personal.



Bloom's Taxonomy

Benjamin Bloom (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*
www.wikipedia.org

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