

Preface

If you have picked up this book, we can safely assume you have questions about assessment in mathematics. That is great, because this book is meant to address those questions. Notice, though, that we say “address” rather than “answer.” This book does not attempt to answer assessment questions in an authoritative, theoretical manner, but instead invites you into a deep, rich conversation with colleagues where the answering of questions happens after reflection and dialogue, and more than likely means that partial answers give way to new questions.

We have called the book *Questions Worth Asking* because this book focuses more on questions than answers. It is a collection of stories written by actual math teachers in BC who are wrestling with questions about assessment, and have agreed to share some of their struggles and successes with colleagues around the province. We have designed the book to be in the spirit of focused professional dialogue that we know is already occurring for the writers of these stories, and which would benefit the wider membership of the BC Association of Math Teachers (BCAMT). We all have a lot to tell each other, and this book is intended to facilitate such dialogue. Our vision is that you take these stories as extended conversations with colleagues who might work in a classroom next door to yours. Imagine, if you will, that you are wondering about how journals can be used in a math class, and you hear a neighbouring teacher is doing just that. So you go to her and ask, “What can you tell me about journaling in math?” The story of Melissa in this book is one colleague’s answer to such a question. Our intent is not that you would adopt the strategies and interventions in these stories wholesale, but that you would take them in this spirit of ideas shared by fellow teachers, to be discussed, reflected on, adapted, and even respectfully challenged.

While we only minimally edited the stories themselves, preferring to retain as much of each author’s unique, authentic voice as possible, we did feel some supporting elements would help readers locate themselves within each story’s context. So the editors have provided a short preamble, a list of things to look for, and a set of further discussion

questions for each story. These pieces are where we try to highlight the common themes we have found in the stories, which serve to tie these specific stories as instances of actual practice into the wider field of theories about assessment.

We could have chosen a number of different groups of theoretical terms to emphasize, but instead narrowed the list down to the common framework of assessment *of*, *for*, and *as* learning. This framework is common enough to need some fleshing out, and also broad enough to relate to most of the issues that arise. So in the preambles and the discussion questions, we refer at times to one or more of these terms in order to examine what they mean separately and to explore some of the interplay between these three modes of assessing. It is common to point out the supposed dichotomy between *of* and *for*, where the former is measuring achievement at the end of a learning cycle and the latter is promoting learning within the learning cycle. For many it is not always so clear where the *as* part fits. We hope that the reflection and dialogue arising out of reading this book will help people better understand this framework.

We do not feel however, that this theoretical framework provides enough structure to make sense of all the tensions mathematics teachers feel with respect to assessment. So we also draw attention to other factors that appear throughout the stories. In addition to the three modes of assessment, a variety of purposes are also involved in the assessment decisions the teachers in these stories make. The three over-arching purposes are to communicate about learning, to value what is important, and to report out on achievement. Uniting these three purposes is a recognition that assessment is not about ranking students. Rather, these stories reinforce that assessment centers on making judgements about evidence of learning, rather than totaling and computing scores or points.

Another unifying theme in this collection is the metaphor of navigation in assessment. Many stories explore some aspect of the questions of where students are at in their learning, where they are going, and how they can get there. Obviously this metaphor overlaps in significant

ways with the purposes and modes discussed above, but it also adds a dimension to the discussion that we feel can help teachers connect with the stories and find maximum meaning in them.

We feel quite confident that finding meaning in these stories will not be difficult. Even if the questions that have brought you to this book are not directly addressed by a story, the themes that connect the stories are likely also to connect to your questions. Or perhaps the over-arching questions you bring to the book are about what all the fuss is about, and you approach these discussions with a healthy skepticism. We welcome you to the discussion too, and trust that the authors of these stories will help reveal what the fuss is about, at least for them personally.

Who should read this book

The introduction above already suggests that this book is for anyone with questions about assessment in mathematics classrooms. As a publication of the BCAMT, the book is obviously intended as a benefit for members, part of our objective to support teachers in understanding changing assessment practices. But we hope too that the book serves the needs of readers beyond the BCAMT membership.

The book can be profitably read by an individual who has assessment-related questions, but it is really our intent for the book to become a resource to support discussion among groups of readers. We hope that math departments read these stories together. We hope that informal groups of colleagues in schools or districts read and share thoughts about these stories together.

The book could also serve as a resource for more formal discussion or study groups on assessment. If you are a facilitator of such a group, perhaps a district curriculum coordinator or administrator, consider using these stories to focus discussion and to provide some strategies to try.

How to read this book

As mentioned, this book should be read with other people. The stories are thought-provoking and can provide insights for the solitary reader, but the most benefit to our professional practice will come from reflecting on and discussing the stories with colleagues. The stories are short enough to be read at the beginning of a meeting, with time after for discussing reactions and addressing some of the further discussion questions.

The questions themselves are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather suggestive of the kinds of ideas worth discussing. If you are facilitating discussion about a story, pick and choose from the questions ones that you feel will best work with your group. Or, pose your own questions.

Our intention is that these stories will provoke good discussion, but it is also our hope that they will cause readers to try new assessment strategies. Perhaps the strategy in a story could be tried out by a group of teachers, who then meet and continue the discussion by reporting on personal reactions. Adapting the strategies is also naturally a good idea, or generating alternate approaches to addressing the intent of the teacher in one of these stories. Whatever the case, this book can be used fruitfully to guide professional inquiry around assessment practices in a math department or district learning community.

There are a number of ways to navigate the book itself. Flipping through the stories, one or more of the titles may jump out at you because they resonate with questions you have been asking yourself. Alternatively, you may flip through with attention to the ‘things to look for’ lists, finding stories that address the themes that interest you. The index at the back organizes these themes and groups the stories by topic, so you can more directly locate stories of interest.