

## Introduction

Letter grades remain the most widely used form of assessment in American high schools today (Marzano, 2000; Trumbull & Farr, 2000). As noted by Farr, however, “using a single grade to capture a student’s learning over the course of some arbitrary grading period raises serious questions about the validity and value of such information. A single grade can hide much more than it reveals” (p. 9). Indeed, assigning letter grades effectively reduces the complexity of a student’s work and progress into a synoptic, falsely simplistic number, and neglects the nuances of each student’s strengths and weaknesses over time. The net result can be an over-emphasis on comparison between peers, as well as a distancing from the true value of learning.

In this article, I look closely at one Southern California school (Progressive Secondary School, a pseudonym) that implements alternative assessment measures—narrative evaluations, standards-based rubrics, portfolios, and end-of-year presentations—in place of letter grades, on a schoolwide basis. Using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003), I analyze how Progressive strategically subverts the discourse of traditional assessment by implementing methods which emphasize personal growth, meaningful feedback, and ongoing dialogical interaction between students, teachers, and parents.

In particular, I analyze the discourse of alternative assessment at Progressive in terms of genres, inter-textuality, dialogicality (Freire, 1972), and the “public sphere” (Habermas, 1962/1991). While traditional assessment<sup>1</sup> is generally limited to just one genre (written report cards, which function as a definitive, top-down statement of “how a student has done”), assessment at Progressive encompasses multiple genres with varying purposes, including written assessment (narrative evaluations and rubrics, or detailed checklists of criteria and quality indicators; see Andrade, 2000), constructed assessment (portfolios), and performative assessment (end-of-year presentations).<sup>2</sup> These presentations allow for multiple voices—or “texts”—to contribute to the discussion of how well a student has done, and shift assessment into a version of the discursive realm that Habermas has labeled the “public sphere.”

The goal of this paper is to show how alternative assessment methods as carried out at Progressive may allow for a more dialogical conception of evaluation, ultimately leading to a more systemic shift in the uses and value of assessment (Gipps, 1999). Although Progressive’s alternative assessment system is only one reconception of how evaluation can be carried out in high school, it nonetheless provides a valuable glimpse at the possibility for meaningful change.

## **Research Context**

### *Discourse analysis*

Discourse in education has been analyzed from numerous perspectives, ranging from the construction of mathematical understanding (Cobb, Boufi, McClain, & Whitenack, 1997) to the perpetuation of power dynamics between pupils and teachers (Chouliaraki, 1998; Mariage, 2002; Tennessen, 1986), and more (see Hicks, 1995-96 for an excellent overview). Within the context of assessment, researchers have primarily explored the socio-cultural dynamics of evaluation. Tunstall (2001), for instance, looks at the ways in which “social reality” and power relations are constructed in infant classrooms, by analyzing the type of feedback—rewarding, disapproving, etc.—provided to students, while Gipps (1999) argues that assessment is a “social activity” which we can only understand by the “social, cultural, economic, and political contexts in which it operates” (p. 355).

While the term “discourse” has multiple meanings and uses, for the purposes of this paper I draw upon Fairclough’s (2003) hybrid notion of discourse as both “textually oriented” (with “text” meant to openly include “any actual instance of language in use”) and concerned with broader “social theoretical issues.” As Fairclough notes, his version of critical discourse analysis oscillates “between a focus on specific texts and a focus on... the ‘order of discourse’, the relatively durable social structuring of language which is itself one element of the relatively durable structuring and networking of social practices” (p. 3).

By applying critical discourse analysis to the assessment methods used at Progressive, I hope to point out the ways in which “language [does not] merely reflect, or correspond, to a pre-existing reality” (Maclure, 2003, p. 4), but instead can be used strategically to construct a new “reality” of assessment on a schoolwide basis. While such a shift in perception may not occur within each individual student at Progressive (indeed, such an argument would be extremely difficult to prove), my point here is to show that the school itself, as an organizational unit, is attempting to reframe (Lakoff, 2004) how assessment is viewed and used. Thus, rather than achieving the “successful failure” posited by Varenne & McDermott (1999), in which it is assumed that a certain number of students in American schools will always be at the bottom of any ranking system, I show how Progressive’s assessment attempts to provide a literal and discursive space in which *every* student can succeed, to his or her unique abilities.

### *Alternative assessment*

In this paper, I explore the cultural and social contexts within which alternative assessment methods are implemented at Progressive Secondary School. Yet Progressive is not the first, and certainly not the only, school to utilize alternative assessment methods. Meier (1995) and Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Falk (1995) published books on the use of alternative assessment methods in public schools; more recently, authors such as Levine (2002) and Toch (2003) have discussed the use of authentic assessment methods at small, alternative public high schools.

Within the literature of broader educational change, researchers such as Darling-Hammond (1997) and Wagner (2002) continue to argue that meaningful assessment methods are an essential element of public school reform. Countless other academic articles and books have been published which attest to the advantages of alternative assessment methods (see, for example, Ardivino, Hollingsworth, & Ybarra, 2000; Trumbull & Farr, 2000; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). My goal is to take this valuable research a step further by analyzing how the very discourse of alternative assessment can allow for a reconception of how we evaluate students.

### **Background of Research Site**

Progressive Secondary School (grades 6-12) opened in the fall of 2000 as an adjunct to the Progressive K-5 site, founded in 1971. Its student body is divided into Divisions rather than grades: Division 1 (D1) is a transition year for 6<sup>th</sup> graders; D2 includes 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders; D3 includes 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders; and D4—also called the “Senior Institute”—includes 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders. According to Progressive’s website, this multi-aged divisional approach “allows for long-term relationships between students and teachers, flexibility in student placement, and a curriculum that is developmentally appropriate.”<sup>3</sup> Each student is assigned to an advisor, who looks out for their interests over the two years they are in a particular division.

Because Progressive is a private school, it is not beholden to state standards; instead, students are assessed on what are called the Habits of Heart and Mind, modified from those developed by the Coalition for Essential Schools (see *Figure 1* below). For each class, students are given in-depth narrative evaluations which are used in close conjunction with four standards-based markings: Does Not Meet, Approaches, Meets, Exceeds (I refer to them as DAME hereafter). On their project rubrics as well as their biannual narrative evaluations, students receive DAME marks in each of the Habits, for each subject

area.<sup>4</sup> On rubrics, specific comments are written at the bottom; on the triannual narrative evaluations, teachers go into even more depth in describing a student's work as a whole throughout the quarter.

Students collect their work, along with rubrics, in portfolios. Every other year, they present and defend their collective work in front of an audience of peers, teachers, administrators, and parents. This process is known as Gatewaying (in 8th and 10th grade) or presenting a Senior Exhibition (in twelfth grade), and students spend months preparing for it. If they are successful in their defense, they are allowed to pass on to the next Division, or, in the case of D4 students presenting a Senior Exhibition, to graduate.

Graduation at Progressive also requires the successful completion of three interdisciplinary projects—an Academic Passion project, a Personal Challenge project, and a Community Involvement project—which become a major part of a student's Senior Exhibition. In addition, students must present evidence of their growth in three key areas: Citizenship and Leadership; Lifelong Learning; and College and Career.

Finally, it should be noted that while Progressive is a private school, it is “an independent school with a public mission,” and is deeply “committed to making connections with schools and programs in the public sector” (from Progressive's website). Progressive's Outreach Center coordinator hosts professional development seminars which are designed to help local public high schools in the process of converting into Small Learning Communities.<sup>5</sup> Thus, while few public high schools are currently able to implement assessment in the way Progressive can, Progressive itself is working hard to help public schools adapt them to their own unique needs and constraints.

***Figure 1. Habits of Heart and Mind at Progressive Secondary School***

**The Habit of Perspective:** The ability to address questions from multiple viewpoints and to use a variety of ways to solve problems.

**The Habit of Evidence:** The ability to bring together relevant information, to judge the credibility of sources, to find out for oneself.

**The Habit of Connection:** The ability to look for patterns and ways that things fit together in order to utilize diverse material to form new solutions.

**The Habit of Convention:** The ability to acknowledge accepted standards in any area in order to be understood and to understand others.

**The Habit of Service to the Common Good:** The ability to recognize the effects of one's actions upon others, coupled with the desire to make the community a better place for all.

**The Habit of Collaboration:** The ability to work effectively with others, accepting and giving appropriate assistance.

**The Habit of Ethical Behavior:** The ability to understand how personal values influence behavior and to live one's life according to ethical principles.

## Methodology

Data in this article was collected over a one-year period (from spring of 2005 to spring of 2006), as part of a broader ethnographic case study of students' responses to assessment methods at Progressive. Primary documents analyzed for this study include Progressive's website; Progressive's brochures and flyers; a letter from Progressive's administrator to parents regarding its assessment policies and practices; sample rubrics from student projects; sample narrative evaluations; and work from student portfolios. In addition to document analysis, I draw upon transcripts from personal interviews with students and teachers, as well as field notes from observations of end-of-the-year Gateways and Senior Exhibitions, parent-teacher-student conferences, professional development workshops, and classroom discussions.

In my data analysis, I utilize a range of hermeneutical approaches—including analyses of inter-textuality, genres, the public sphere, and dialogicality—to explore how assessment at Progressive functions as an interactive, multi-generic process. As Gee and Green (1998) note:

The task of the discourse analyst is to construct representations of cultural models by studying people's actions across time and events... The analyst asks questions about the patterns of practice that make visible what members need to know, produce, and interpret to participate in socially appropriate ways. (p. 125)

My goal, then, is to “make visible” the complex network of social interactions—the “cultural model”—that comprises the unique ways in which students are evaluated at Progressive.

Given the inherent limitations of a case study format, I am unable to make meaningful comparisons between students at Progressive and at other schools; to that end, I can't claim that Progressive's student body wouldn't thrive just as well (or not) under a different system of assessment. What I've tried to do here instead is simply to share the findings I gathered while paying close attention to how Progressive's students engaged with the assessment methods at their unique school.

## Key Findings

The discourse of assessment at Progressive contrasts in several significant ways with that of traditional letter grades. These include:

1. the use of multiple genres of assessment (what I refer to as *written*, *performed*, and *constructed*);
2. the inter-textuality of narrative evaluations and Gateways, with multiple texts and voices incorporated;



scope, but less so. Assessment taking place in the classroom is the most local in scale, and arguably the most meaningful (and useful) to students.

As an independent school, Progressive is not beholden to any particular school district, nor does it require its students to take national or statewide standardized exams. Therefore, all mandated assessment at Progressive takes place near the “local” level.<sup>6</sup> In *Figure 3* below, I outline three major genres of assessment at Progressive (what I am referring to as written, performative, and constructed) and give examples of each. As Fairclough notes, genres are rarely used in complete isolation; a portfolio, for instance, can be considered both constructed and written, while a parent-teacher-student conference relies on written assessment as well as verbal (performative) discussion of a student’s progress. Fairclough refers to this as “genre mixing.”

<i>Figure 3. Genres of assessment at Progressive</i>	
<b>Genre</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Written	Rubric Narrative evaluation
Constructed	Portfolio
Performative	End-of-year presentation Teacher-parent-student conference

*Written* assessment—that is, rubrics and narrative evaluations, or “evals”—is the most “top-down” form of evaluation at Progressive, and is most akin to traditional letter grades. While students occasionally write notes on their evals (Rebecca, for instance, wrote “What do you mean? I always do that!” on the side of her teacher’s comment that she wasn’t taking notes in math class [Interview with author, February 18, 2005]), these quickly move into the *performative* realm of teacher-student-parent conferences and/or students’ individual discussions with teachers.

*Constructed* assessment ultimately allows for more agency on the part of students, as they put together (“construct”) their own portfolios and exhibitions. Although there are certain requirements all students must follow, there is a certain amount of flexibility as well. When I asked Lisa (a senior) to show me her portfolio, for instance, she explained to me:

**Lisa:** What I have here is lists of everything they wanted you to have in it. And then here in front—the way I organized it is a little bit different [than usual]. The list they [teachers] had is Folio One, Folio Two, and Folio Three. [But] I wanted to show a lot of my work from throughout the past two years, so I thought it would be better to organize it as math, literature, history, science, Spanish, community involvement. What I have here in the front are all the things that don't necessarily fit into one of those categories.

**Me:** So you did not do Folio One, Two, Three?

**Lisa:** I didn't, because it didn't make sense to me. For students who want to do the bare minimum, it makes sense—for people who just want to find one rubric from each class and put it in, that makes perfect sense. But I wanted to go in depth. (Interview with author, June 7, 2006)

Thus, for Lisa, putting together her portfolio—the culmination of her work over the last two years—was a highly individualized experience. She went above and beyond the minimum requirements, ultimately constructing a massive five-inch binder full of what she described to me as:

Rubrics and projects that I was very proud of; and also, like, to show my growth [from] my junior year projects that weren't very good, so you can *visually* see the growth I've made. (Interview with author, June 7, 2006)

Lisa's portfolio is an example of the way in which students at Progressive are asked to take top-down written assessment (rubrics and evals) and *construct* their own unique “artifact” of evaluation. By choosing which projects and rubrics to include in her portfolio, Lisa was thus taking teacher-driven assessment a step further, and reconstructing it as evidence of her personal growth and hard work.

While I labeled portfolios as “constructed” in *Figure 3* above, they are clearly an example of what Fairclough refers to as “genre mixing”: they are comprised of written evaluations and rubrics, and are eventually presented (“performed”) at end-of-the-year presentations, which in themselves are perhaps the ultimate example of “genre mixing” at Progressive. During these presentations (which normally last between 30 and 60 minutes) students either present a slideshow on PowerPoint (for Senior Exhibitions), use an overhead projector to show samples of their work (10<sup>th</sup> grade Gateways), or rely on notecards (8<sup>th</sup> grade Gateways).

As with their portfolios, students are given quite a bit of freedom in terms of how they construct their presentations, but, once again, there are a number of guidelines which they must follow. For instance, all students must:

- incorporate examples of written work from their portfolio;
- discuss rubrics and/or teacher feedback from each class; and
- defend their growth in each of the Habits of Heart and Mind.

Seniors must also:

- discuss their growth in the areas of citizenship and leadership;
- describe their progress towards becoming “lifelong learners”;
- explain the ways in which they are prepared for college and/or a career; and
- share findings from their three major interdisciplinary projects.

Students may also choose to show clips from their own video productions, perform a musical or dramatic piece, and/or display their visual art projects.

Elly’s Senior Exhibition, described in the vignette below, is a representative example of the way in which various genres are incorporated into assessment at Progressive:<sup>7</sup>

When I walk into the room where Elly’s Senior Exhibition is taking place, I notice a quilt draped over a chair and a scarf lying on the podium, both of which look handknit. Elly is setting up her PowerPoint presentation. Once everyone has arrived, she begins by reading her “Essential Question” out loud to us: “What are the threads that have been knit into the fabric of who I am?”<sup>8</sup> Elly holds up the orange-and-brown-patched quilt, telling us that she knitted it herself. This metaphor, which frames her entire Senior Presentation, is one she came up with herself, based on her love of knitting.

As Elly discusses her progress in various academic areas at Progressive, she displays two essays on an overhead projector. One is an essay from last year, with a number of mistakes. “I think my teacher was being very generous in giving me an ‘Approaches,’” she says to us. The other is a more recent essay, showing her improvement in the area of writing a thesis statement. Elly then discusses her Community Involvement work in three different capacities: with Habitat for Humanity, in Progressive’s library, and at an animal shelter. She has posted photos from each of these experiences on her PowerPoint. After this, she lists each of the Habits of Heart and Mind, and explains how she will use each one throughout the rest of her life.

Next, Elly talks about her ceramics class, which she says turned out to be “so much more than what I thought it would be.” She has a table set up with the various ceramic pieces she made in the class—bowls, slabs, and “light sculptures.” She begins by holding up a slab sculpture, and talks about the concept of addition and subtraction— “and that relates to math!” She tells us that she’s an “absolute Disney nut”, and points out the Mickey Mouse head on the slab, then explains that it is actually a map of the route to get from her house to

Disneyland, complete with freeways and a prominent landmark—a fountain—along the way. As she picks up the rest of her pieces to show us, she confidently uses the new terminology she’s learned: “slipping and scoring,” “pinching and pulling,” etc. She passes around two bowls she made on a wheel and instructs us on where specifically to look for evidence of her growth from one to the other. Next she picks up her light sculpture, and explains about how she used negative space to create the holes where light shines through. The sculpture is painted blue and is shaped like Mickey’s Sorcerer’s Apprentice hat; the holes are Mickey Mouse heads, and when yellow light shines through them, it does indeed look like Mickey’s blue and yellow hat. Finally, she shares that she is going to be teaching ceramics at an art camp this summer “from 8:30 in the morning until 4:30 in the afternoon—all day!”

Elly’s Essential Question for her Academic Passion project is, “How can art represent world problems or issues?” She tells us her goal was to create a music video, and to learn everything about how one is put together. She shows a PowerPoint slide listing all the people she went to for help in certain areas—directing, costumes, makeup, actors, filming, and editing—and says that she had to collaborate with a lot of people to learn this craft. She shows her music video, called “Peace,” and says she wanted to make something that counteracts the violence in Iraq and 9/11. She comments on how long it took to make even such a short video.

Elly wraps up her presentation by listing some of the ways she’s grown in the last year. She talks about signing up for the Prom Committee, on her own initiative rather than being influenced by her mom. She mentions joining a Beat Generation book club on campus, again without her mom’s influence. She says she signed up to do her own art gallery presentation, which was another stretch for her. She talks about being a host to a student from a local high school, who was visiting Progressive. She mentions asking her parents for voice lessons this past year—her first time ever wanting lessons in anything. Finally, Elly talks about getting a role in an “Into the Woods” production on campus, which she credits to her singing lessons. To conclude her presentation, Elly sings the song “Go the Distance,” to “show my journey” at Progressive, she tells us. (Observation by author, May 25, 2005)

Elly’s Senior Exhibition is a clear example of the ways in which different genres of assessment at Progressive are incorporated into one cohesive “performative” event. Rather than simply being given written feedback from teachers, Elly was required to construct both a portfolio and a PowerPoint presentation, and demonstrate (“perform”) her accomplishments in front of an audience.

I continue this discussion of the performative aspect of Gateways and Senior Exhibitions in the next two sections, in which I elaborate upon how various voices (or texts) are included in Progressive’s multi-generic concept of assessment, and how assessment is shifted into a version of what Habermas refers to as “the public sphere.”

*Inter-textuality of alternative assessment*

“Inter-textuality” refers to the incorporation of multiple voices into one text. In terms of assessment at Progressive, it can occur in one of two ways:

- within a written text itself, as when teachers incorporate specific examples of student work into narrative evaluations to substantiate their claims about a student’s performance, or when a student (like Rebecca—see above) writes notes on the side of her teachers’ comments;
- when a particular “text” (e.g., a student’s evaluation) is discussed by numerous people during conferences or Gateways, and is thus informed by multiple perspectives.

Bloom and Egan-Robertson (1993) propose that inter-textuality is always part of a social interaction, rather than simply being located within a text and/or within an individual’s mind:

As people act and react to each other, they use language and other semiotic systems to make meaning, to constitute social relationships, and to take social action. Intertextual relationships are constructed by people as part of how they act and react to each other. (p. 330)

Indeed, the performative aspect of evaluation at Progressive fits this description perfectly. As described above in my vignette of Elly’s Senior Presentation, students are required to present selections from their own work (essays, math problems, pieces of art work, video clips, etc.) and may choose to incorporate teachers’ comments as well. An additional layer of textuality emerges from the very act of presenting these items to an audience, who then incorporate their own voices by asking questions and making comments. Because the latter form of inter-textuality is so closely aligned with shifting assessment into the public sphere, this issue will be addressed in more detail in the following section.

*Assessment in the public sphere*

The process of Gatewaying is a clear example of how assessment at Progressive is moved into the “public sphere” (Habermas, 1962/1991). While the final determination of “how well a student has done” (i.e., his or her marks on a report card) remains under the auspices of teachers, Progressive believes it’s essential to make such assessments transparent and open to discussion, and thus has implemented end-of-year Gateways since the first year it opened (Thaler, 2006). I begin this section by briefly discussing what the term “public sphere” means, and how it applies to my work here.

Drawing upon accounts of coffeehouses in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, Habermas conceived of the “public sphere” as a place where individuals could come together to engage in rational deliberation over issues of importance to the state. Fraser (1990, p. 57) has since argued that Habermas’s notion of “public sphere” as “a space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction” was meaningful, but needed to “undergo...critical interrogation and reconstruction” if it was to be useful for “the limits of actually existing democracy.” More recently, Thomas (2004) has similarly argued that the public sphere should be reconceptualized as a discursive space, where connections can be made across various discourses and ideologies.

For the purposes of this paper, I elaborate upon Habermas’s notion of “public sphere” to include the gathering of parents, siblings, teachers, friends, and others who come to witness a student defending his or her work. It is important to note, however, that schools—including Progressive—rarely exist as entirely democratic institutions, particularly when it comes to issues of assessment.<sup>9</sup> That is, as I noted above, despite the high degree of personalization which emerges between teachers and students at Progressive, teachers remain the primary determinants of how students are evaluated, given that it is their written feedback which ultimately goes into students’ official transcripts.

On the other hand, Gateways can still be viewed as a form of “public sphere” for assessment, given that teachers’ feedback is made known to the public, and is mediated (at least verbally) by feedback from students themselves and others. By having the chance to reflect on their own learning through the “performance” of Gateways, students are able to take their teachers’ assessments of them and “own” them by explaining to an audience *why* they got the marks they did from their teachers—and whether they agree with these assessments or not.

In his Senior Exhibition, for instance, Edward chose to show an assessment on a project he didn't receive very good marks on, but nonetheless found great personal value in. As he explained to us:

For my MUSH [Modern United States History] project I researched the SNCC nonviolence movement, the Zoot Suit riots, and Cesar Chavez. I did not get the best assessment on this project, but I did learn a lot. I decided to show this project because this was my last project, and this was my project that I worked on the hardest, and this was the one where I put everything that I knew together. And this is my project that I mostly learned from: I learned from the past into what just happened a few months ago, and what's happening right now with the Hispanic community trying to find civil rights. (Observation by author, June 2, 2006)

Thus, Edward was able to take the rubric he received from his teacher and go a step further, expanding it to include his own perspective on the project as a significant personal learning experience.

Similarly, during her 10<sup>th</sup> grade Gateway, when showing us a rubric from her timed writing on the character of Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*, Melanie noted, “I got a pretty good assessment, but I myself wasn't happy with it, since I didn't get a chance to elaborate” (Observation by author, June 3, 2005).<sup>10</sup> She went on to say she was glad she was able to expand her timed writing into a more formal essay later, which she did by going back to find a particular piece of evidence she needed in the “Queen Mab” speech given by Mercutio.

The above examples show the ways in which students contribute feedback on their own performance—but feedback isn't just from students. Below is a vignette from Eric's Gateway, focusing on the final, “question-and-answer” portion of his presentation:

Frank, Eric's Spanish teacher, asks Eric what he knows about the Princeton offense. Eric says “not much,” and Frank goes on to describe it as a synthesis of structure and creativity: a perfect balance, almost impossible to teach. “As a Spanish student, you've got the structure down—how can you bring in the creativity part?” he asks Eric. “It's the intent of communication...” Eric says. “Surrounding myself with people in the community, not just the classroom.” “When you feel inspired to speak, don't hold back,” Frank advises him. “I'll help you tweak it afterwards.” “That's definitely a goal of mine,” Eric responds.

Matt, Eric's English teacher, says, “I don't have a whole lot to grill you on... You've really matured... It's been a pleasure to see that happen.” But he asks Eric a question about reading different genres: “What did it take to make you successful at reading *Mrs. Dalloway*?” Eric responds, “You take the best thing you can from uncomfortable situations. There's no excuse to just give up.”

Maria, Eric's art teacher and his mentor for a photography portfolio he put together, reminds him that “being independent means knowing when to ask for help,” and commends him on being open to criticism, and for being a mentor to other students. “I'd like to push you a little further—beyond the art gallery,” she says. “Photographers [can] make change with their photography. A lot of people don't like cameras being around to shoot injustice. You can use your camera as a tool for documenting injustice, and bring it back to Progressive.” “I would go for that!” Eric agrees.

Leticia, Eric's math teacher, speaks up next. “I commend you on asking for help [in math] when you were struggling,” she begins. “I know

that was really hard for you.” She talks about how difficult it was for her as his teacher to write the narrative evaluation on which he got a “Does Not Meet” in math. She asks him to describe how he plans to keep up with his math over the summer, and Eric details his plan of action to her.

Eric’s mom jumps in at this point: “I can’t resist!” she says. “I thought you might take the opportunity to talk about your research on Darfur.” Eric explains to us that he’s been participating on the website [Savedarfur.org](http://Savedarfur.org) since he returned from a trip to Washington, D.C., and that he ordered fundraising bracelets to hand out at his Gateway but they haven’t arrived yet.

Sue, Eric’s advisor, concludes the Gateway by saying, “[Now for] something harder. I want you to talk about the need to deal with stress. What does it do to you?” Eric admits that he got sick when he was stressed from work earlier in the year, and says he learned that he needs to handle this earlier and take better care of himself. Leticia asks him, “Where do you see yourself in gaining the balance between self, others, and asking for help?” to which Eric replies, “Saying no is the hardest thing. I’ve enjoyed helping my peers, but [I need to reflect] on helping too much.” He talks about changing this from a responsibility to something extra which he “can do” or not. (Observation by author, June 8, 2005)

Eric’s Gateway is a particularly salient example of the dialogical, inter-textual nature of assessment as it is moved into the “public sphere” of Gateways at Progressive. As should be clear from the vignette above, Eric’s teachers and parents all contributed to the discussion of his progress as a student, and challenged him to make goals for the future. Multiple voices thus contributed to the overall picture of “how Eric had done” over the last two years, rather than one person simply determining his progress in terms of letter grades, and presenting this to him on a piece of paper.

Again, it should be stressed that Gateways do not determine or influence a student’s evaluation in a course; this power remains strictly in the hand of teachers, who hold the final say. What’s important here is the fact that Gateways allow the processes of formal and informal assessment to inform one another, with Eric’s formal evaluations serving as the starting point for a broader discussion of his study habits and goals. While the comments provided by Eric’s teachers and parents at this point—as well as Eric’s own comments—don’t have any bearing on the marks he’s received, they *do* play a part in his future success, as he’s prompted to think more deeply about issues that have arisen throughout the school year, and that will continue to affect his career as a student.

*Dialogicality of alternative assessment*

As indicated in each of the sections above, assessment as carried out at Progressive allows for a considerable amount of dialogical exchange between students, teachers, and parents. Rather than simply being given written grades by their teachers, students at Progressive take an active part in (informally) assessing themselves, and critically analyze the feedback they are given. This process of reflection and feedback then contributes to the next iteration of a student's progress as students set goals for the future, and assessment becomes part of a student's process of growth rather than a finite pronouncement.

The ultimate goal of dialogical assessment, I would argue, is what Freire refers to as "true education" (1972, p. 81)—that is, education in which students move beyond naïve acceptance of the grades they're given, learning instead to reflect critically on *why* they received the marks they did, and what this means for their future success. Only by reflecting "simultaneously on themselves and the world without dichotomizing this reflection from action" (p. 71)—that is, applying assessment directly to future improvement—can students (and teachers) hope to shift assessment away from a top-down "banking" model of education/assessment, and towards a more collaborative, problem-solving approach.

A critical element of dialogical assessment at Progressive, and one which merits discussion here, is the close working relationship that emerges between teachers and students. As Paul put it:

There is no way that a teacher at Progressive can *not* know you. They end up knowing *something* about you, even if it's just what you like to do for fun. (Interview with author, May 9, 2006)

Paul compared his experiences at Progressive with his old, "grade-based" school, where "they didn't really have to pay attention to who you are and what was going on in class other than your grades." It should be noted, however, that the use of narrative evaluations at a school such as Progressive does not necessarily imply closer relationships; teachers may "know" just as much about their students at a small school using grades.

With that said, narratives may ultimately reveal a depth of understanding about "students as learners" on the part of teachers which students have no idea about until they read them. As Ellen said:

I didn't realize how much Harry [my math teacher] knew about me until he wrote in my assessment, "Ellen likes to start her math papers with... her opinion on gambling before just explaining... the mathematics of gambling," and I do that! (Interview with author, February 25, 2005)

Thus, narrative evaluations provide one convenient venue (though certainly not the only one possible) for teachers to show students what they know about them as learners, thereby opening up the pathway for meaningful dialogical interaction. As Chris said to me:

[A narrative] lays it all out so nothing's in the dark, you know everything, and when you know everything and your teachers know everything, it's much easier [to improve]. (Interview with author, February 9, 2005)

Unlike letter grades without comments, narrative evaluations enable students to see detailed feedback of their work, and understand what they did well on or not. George corroborated this when he said:

Using narrative evaluations really allows the teacher to be as honest with the student as possible, allowing the student to learn as much as possible. It doesn't hold anything back. (Interview with author, May 16, 2006)

If a student doesn't agree with a teacher's particular assessment of his or her work (i.e., the quality of a topic sentence), the fact that this is pinpointed so clearly in an evaluation prompts further detailed discussion about this particular issue. As Lisa said:

If the student doesn't agree [with something on an evaluation], then it's right there, and they can blatantly confront that, and have an open conversation [about], you know, what can I do to fix it, why is it this way? (Interview with author, June 7, 2006)

Again, such openness of communication isn't predicated upon narrative evaluations, and certainly happens at schools with more traditional assessment methods as well; but evaluations *do* serve as one convenient way to facilitate more in-depth conversation.

However, students at Progressive don't always have close relationships with their teachers and advisors. As Tania said to me during our first interview together (when she was in 10th grade, and new to the school):

I don't discuss much with my advisor, because we've had personal clashes in the past, and we just don't get along. I mean, I respect him but at the same time it's just like, he tells me, like, "Tania you didn't demonstrate this," and I nod. You know, I'm not about to start anything with him, especially when I'm doing so well right now. (Interview with author, January 31, 2005)

For Tania, the specific feedback she received on her evaluations from her advisor didn't mean much to her, since she didn't believe he was accurately assessing her performance. Instead, she chose to simply accept the marks she was given, given that overall she was "doing well" in the class.

Clearly, then, dialogical assessment seems to require an open, trusting relationship between teachers and students in order to be most effective. Tania

had recently transferred to Progressive from a school using letter grades, and seemed to miss the “objectivity” of this system. Thus, it should be noted that while Progressive attempts to foster an environment of dialogicality and openness between teachers and students, not all students are comfortable with this—at least not at first. In a second interview conducted the following year, Tania seemed much more relaxed and positive about the type of assessment used at Progressive, as indicated in the following response to my question of how well she liked being assessed on the Habits of Heart and Mind:

I like it... All my teachers get a good feel about who I am, through my papers, and through the way I write, and the way I present myself, and presentations, and my active participation. (Interview with author, May 12, 2006)

Tania’s primary concern at the time of our second interview was the stress of applying to colleges, a topic which emerged again and again throughout our brief conversation together.

Certain students I spoke with noted that the various forms of assessment used at Progressive turn teachers into “more than teachers.” As Rebecca put it, “It *makes* a relationship with my teachers, rather than just being like, they’re a teacher” (Interview with author, February 18, 2005). Because teachers provide such detailed, personalized feedback, she said, they “make you feel like they really want you to succeed, rather than, if you fail, then you fail.” We also commented on the closeness between teachers and students in relation to assessment:

Progressive students have wonderful, close relationships between their teachers. And I really think that’s because of the reflective process that you have to go through in order to make narrative assessments. (Interview with author, May 15, 2006)

Whether or not this perceived causality holds true, what’s important here is that some students feel the assessment methods used at their school contribute significantly to the closeness of their relationships with their teachers.

Finally, a few students noted that they don’t necessarily think the assessment methods used at Progressive have any bearing on their relationships with teachers. James told me:

I don't think that the narrative evaluations primarily affect relationships with the teachers, because I look at them as a teacher, and they're just trying to help me. I mean, it's kind of the same way that I looked at ABCDF, which is that they're just trying to help you. (Interview with author, May 24, 2006)

Thus, for highly self-motivated students like James, feedback at school is welcome in *any* form, and teachers remain simply professionals who are there to help students achieve their personal best. This type of statement indicates that, for some students, it’s not the *form* of assessment which matters; it’s the type of

relationship they have with their teachers, a finding which certainly merits further exploration.

As noted throughout this section, an essential factor of dialogical assessment at Progressive is the high degree of personalization. Rather than being based exclusively on percentage points, assessment is multilayered, drawing upon both specific standards (expectations) as well as careful consideration of each student's strengths and stretches. Indeed, because assessment at Progressive is so personalized, teachers are able to formally "push" each of their students to succeed. This occurs both in writing (in the narrative evaluations themselves), and orally during Gateways, when teachers provide personalized verbal feedback and encouragement.

During his 8th grade Gateway, for instance, Kevin talked about his struggle with the Habits of Heart in math class, citing a specific time when he played computer games after finishing his assignment instead of offering to help his peers. In front of the Gateway audience, his math teacher (Ms. M) prompted Kevin to reflect more deeply on how he could improve his in-class work Habits the following year:

**Ms. M:** So, since you're so good with numbers, and since you were even able to exceed standards on a couple of projects, what might you have done differently when you were finished with the project? Or maybe, what you *could* do next time?

**Kevin:** Well, like I said, I could have helped peers.

**Ms. M:** For yourself.

**Kevin:** I could have checked over my work, and I could have asked you for additional work, or any extra packet, or that book, or whatever, just to get more practice in, instead of playing computer games, which didn't benefit me at all. So I could have asked for the extra work.

**Ms. M:** And next year you plan on taking the honors option?

**Kevin:** Yeah.

**Ms. M:** I think you should. (Observation by author, June 2, 2006)

While Kevin himself recognized that he could have used his extra time more wisely by helping his peers, Ms. M pushed him even further, prompting him to think about accepting more challenging work, and enrolling in the "honors option" for math the following year. Thus, while Kevin "Exceeded" in the Habits of Mind for math, his less-than-stellar marks in the Habits of Heart indicated room for improvement, and prompted his teacher to encourage him even further.

During interviews, students spoke extensively about the personalization of assessment at their school, and how it (arguably) gives their teachers unique insight into who they are as students, thus leading to feedback for future growth.

Bethany, for instance, commented on how her teachers' knowledge of her strengths and stretches allows them to push her to succeed:

If my math teacher knows that math is not my favorite subject—which he will, because that's how close we get—then he can push me and be like, if I'm doing well in a certain part of math, he can be like, “Well, try more, because you're doing well right here,” 'cause he knows I'm *not* going to try, and so he pushes me right away. (Interview with author, May 16, 2006)

Thus, although all students are evaluated according to the same criteria on any given project—they either Meet, Exceed, Approach, or Do No Meet standards—teachers can write in personal comments at the bottom of the rubrics, encouraging certain students to try harder or keep up the good work. Again, this is not necessarily specific to Progressive's assessment system, but is nonetheless an important element of it.

In his Senior Exhibition, Joel reflected on the end result of such encouragement over his years at Progressive, noting:

Ms. B has pushed me as a writer and a reader, to help me get a deeper understanding of the readings. Ms. C has been constantly pushing me as a writer, to never settle for mediocrity, to always perform my best. Both teachers have pushed me in different ways so I can bring out the best in my work. They have prepared me to be a literary student in a college class. (Observation by author, June 6, 2006).

While students may not always be happy at the time they are being “pushed,” most seniors (like Joel) publicly acknowledge that encouragement from teachers ultimately resulted in them being more ready for the rigorous demands of college.

Indeed, the intimate level of involvement and personal knowledge—not just about academics—that exists between teachers and students at Progressive may be viewed by some as uncomfortably (perhaps inappropriately) close. When interviewing Barbara (previously a public school teacher), she spoke with me about a former principal of hers who came to watch a Gateway at Progressive:

She said she felt *very* uncomfortable, because it was just *too* personal, and she was such an outsider. And it made *me* stop and reflect [on] how intimately we know our students, and how comfortable they are with that. It's true—I could never imagine, at [my old school], someone getting up and giving a presentation, and someone asking them about their social life, or commenting on how much more outgoing they've become, and [how they're] making more friends. It just wouldn't be appropriate. (Interview with author, June 2, 2006)

Of course, this comfort level is likely predicated as well upon the smaller class sizes, the advisory system, and the overall atmosphere of trust and respect at Progressive—not just the assessment methods used. As Sue, another teacher, said:

*Everything* [here] is about personalization, and to try to tease apart the assessment piece of that I think is really hard, because they go so hand in hand. I will say that I think [assessment is] a factor; I just don't know how big of a factor it is. (Interview with author, June 13, 2006)

Thus, when it comes to issues of relationships and personalization at Progressive, it's important to keep in mind that these elements are part of the school's larger philosophy, *not* just the assessment system. At the same time, narrative evaluations and Gateways contribute in an important way to the ongoing climate of open, personalized, dialogical feedback.

### **Conclusion**

The utility of assessment in schools has been discussed many times over (Gipps, 1999), from Foucault's discussion of assessment as a primary disciplinary mechanism of society (1972), to Kohn's argument that all forms of grading should be abolished (1993), to Marzano's assertion that assessment serves a viable purpose in education, and must be critically addressed rather than wished away (2000). Ultimately, because formal assessment in schools appears to be here to stay, we must look closely at how we can shift evaluation from strictly the top-down "disciplinary mechanism" described by Foucault, into a more communicative and dialogical tool for growth, one which strategically combines both formal and informal feedback.

At the heart of reconceptualizing assessment in schools lies the notion of what purposes it ultimately should serve. Gipps (1999) notes that assessment has long been used as an instrument for selection and certification, with a recent shift towards being used for purposes of controlling the curriculum (or standards) taught in schools. On the other hand, alternative assessment (such as that carried out at Progressive) seems to be primarily concerned with "a broader assessment of learning, enhancement of learning for the individual, engagement with the student during assessment, and involvement of teachers in the assessment process" (Gipps, 1999, p. 367).

Such differences in the purposes of assessment can be applied to Habermas's (1962/1991) distinction between "strategic" (rational, or instrumental) actions and "communicative" actions—the former concerned with reaching specific outcomes, and the latter concerned primarily with communication. According to Habermas, all speech acts (or acts of discourse) have the inherent goal of communicating, yet this goal is often buried by the instrumental mandates of modern society. Indeed, the word "assess"—derived from root words meaning "to sit by," yet commonly known as meaning to "judge the worth or value of something"—is a classic example of communication and familiarity ("sitting beside") having been turned into something instrumental

(“judging the worth of”). It could be argued that one of the primary goals of assessment at Progressive is to return it to its roots as a communicative act, in order to provide students with the feedback they need to continue to grow and learn.

In this case study, I’ve attempted to demonstrate how one high school—by strategically subverting the discourse of traditional assessment methods—has reconceptualized the way evaluation is carried out. Progressive’s alternative discourse of assessment provides a powerful example of how high schools can move towards a more multi-generic, inter-textual, dialogical conception of evaluation, yet still provide clear accountability. As many public high schools in America are converted into smaller learning communities, with more attention paid to each student’s individualized growth, it is my hope that an alternative discourse of assessment such as Progressive’s will not be far behind.

**Appendix 1. Sample Rubric with “DAME” Marks and Teacher Comments**

<b>Rubric Name:</b> <i>Cuckoo's Nest</i> Timed Writing			<b>Student Name:</b> Tania W.		<b>Advisor:</b> Ms. N	
<b>Convention</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Connection</b>	<b>Perspective</b>	<b>Common Good</b>	<b>Collaboration</b>	<b>Ethical Behavior</b>
<p>Uses correct spelling, grammar, and paragraph structure – <b>APPROACHES</b></p> <p>Writes logically, concisely, and clearly – <b>MEETS</b></p> <p>Avoids “I” statements and personal feelings – <b>MEETS</b></p> <p>Integrates quotes appropriately into essay – <b>MEETS</b></p> <p>Avoids repetition and redundancy – <b>APPROACHES</b></p>	<p>Uses effective textual evidence to support arguments in a clear, logical manner – <b>APPROACHES</b></p> <p>Communicates a strong grasp of character and plot when discussing evidence – <b>MEETS</b></p> <p>Describes scenes, characters, dialogue accurately and in detail – <b>MEETS</b></p>	<p>Avoids summary and strives for analysis of evidence – <b>APPROACHES</b></p> <p>Actively connects evidence to the argument – <b>APPROACHES</b></p> <p>Writes a successful conclusion that connects the themes of the essay in an original way – <b>APPROACHES</b></p>	<p>Thesis allows student to go in depth with his/her argument – <b>APPROACHES</b></p> <p>Starts each paragraph with a topic sentence that indicates the argument of that paragraph – <b>APPROACHES</b></p>	<p>Meets all daily/weekly reading assignments – <b>MEETS</b></p> <p>Works in a manner that helps maintain the learning and working atmosphere in the classroom – <b>MEETS</b></p>	<p>Follows directions in class and directly answers each essay question – <b>APPROACHES</b></p> <p>Writes neatly and clearly, making the essay accessible to the reader – <b>MEETS</b></p>	<p>Does his/her own work – <b>MEETS</b></p> <p>Strives to do his or her best, strives to take intellectual risks, and appropriately pushes him/herself – <b>MEETS</b></p>
<b>Strongly Approaches</b>	<b>Meets</b>	<b>Approaches</b>	<b>Approaches</b>	<b>Meets</b>	<b>Approaches</b>	<b>Meets</b>

**Comments:** Tania, one way to make your essay on laughter better is to answer the prompt. This is KEY. You need to pick a motif and then argue why or why not it is effective. Your intro does not even use the word motif. Your essay has many good examples of laughter, and thus your evidence is strong, but you don't ever actually say whether your evidence proves that the motif is effective or not (which was the whole point of the essay). Once you clearly write a thesis statement using the language of the prompt (which was also a problem in your essay on Eleanor Roosevelt's quote), you need to dive right into PROVING your argument, not summarizing plot or writing vaguely about character. You need topic sentences to paragraphs that explain the ARGUMENT of the paragraph and tie back into the language of the thesis. Then, at the end of your body paragraphs, you need to write a sentence that ties back to the thesis and underscores how your evidence proved your point.

You actually have two decently-written essays here, and your Convention is quite good (but no "you" statements or contractions, please!). The issue is not your organization or your writing, but rather the force and coherence of your thesis throughout the essay itself.

You have been wonderful in class and with homework. You have been attentive, positive, engaged, and focused. You actively collaborate with your teacher and classmates (when appropriate), and you are a model in these ways. Class discussion and collaboration are key for succeeding in this class, so you have built a strong foundation for yourself.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In using the term “traditional,” I mean simply to point out that letter grades of one kind or another have been the dominant paradigm of evaluation in American schools for well over 100 years. See Farr (2000, p. 5) for an overview of grading practices in America.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that some schools may use letter grades *and* other methods, such as narrative comments underneath a student’s scores. However, Progressive and schools like it are unique in refusing to use letter grades at all, and in utilizing a host of alternative methods on a systematic, *school wide* basis.

<sup>3</sup> Progressive’s website URL is not provided due to issues of confidentiality.

<sup>4</sup> See *Appendix 1* for a sample rubric with DAME marks.

<sup>5</sup> Small Learning Communities are defined by the U.S. Department of Education as including “academies, house plans, schools-within-schools, and magnet schools.” Available at: <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/employ/slc.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Most students at Progressive choose to take the SAT exams and/or various AP exams as prerequisites for college entrance purposes, but these are not mandated by the school itself.

<sup>7</sup> All student and teacher names are pseudonyms.

<sup>8</sup> An Essential Question is an in-depth question meant to help students probe for deeper meaning and understanding.

<sup>9</sup> One exception may be Prologue Alternative High School in Chicago, where teachers and students come to an agreement on how well students have done (Stern, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> A “timed writing” is a written “demonstration of knowledge” in which students are given a certain amount of time to write an essay on a given topic.

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