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Assessment as a Trojan Horse for Educational and Training Programs

One of the most challenging aspects of designing, implementing, and/or evaluating any educational and training program is adequately defining the nature of the knowledge, skills, and competencies we expect from the students who complete the program. Often we rely on vaguely worded standards documents or curriculum frameworks and then use tests and assessments that seem “reasonable” or practical to measure performance but which have serious conceptual limitations and interpretive shortcomings. In this presentation I will discuss how a careful focus on issues of assessment is critical to the success of educational and training programs. Assessment is the “Trojan Horse” that forces us to engage in a serious conversation about the claims we want to make about students as a result of the educative process and the forms of evidence that would support such claims. When we take issues of assessment seriously we are simultaneously led to consider those instructional activities and features of a learning environment that will contribute to the desired student learning outcomes. I will attempt to illustrate these ideas from work underway using an “evidence-centered design” process to frame the goals of instruction in areas as diverse as digital literacy for middle school students to nano-scale science and engineering education for students in grades 7-16 to Advanced Placement high school courses in physics, chemistry, biology and environmental science. The issue then becomes one of how these evidence-centered design concepts play out in the realm of vocational and technical education and how issues of assessment can help clarify goals, purposes, and procedures.

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James W. Pellegrino is Liberal Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor of Cognitive Psychology and Distinguished Professor of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago . He also serves as co-director of UIC's new interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Learning, Introduction, and Teacher Development. James W. Pellegrino's research and development interests focus on children's and adult's thinking and learning and the implications of cognitive research and theory for assessment and instructional practice. Much of his current work is focused on analyses of complex learning and instructional environments, including those incorporating powerful information technology tools, with the goal of better understanding the nature of student learning and the conditions that enhance deep understanding. A special concern of his research is the incorporation of effective formative assessment practices, assisted by technology, to maximize student learning and understanding.