An Example from Classroom Research

Setting: A faculty lounge in a medium-sized college.

Characters: Two college teachers. One is a Classroom Research booster (CRB); the other, a thoughtful skeptic (TS).

TS: Just why is it you think we all should put more time and energy into assessing our classes? Good teachers, and I happen to think I am one, are constantly assessing their students' learning. We've always done that.

CRB: I don't think we necessarily need to spend more time and effort assessing student learning. I do think, however, that we can learn about our students' learning more effectively by using explicit, focused, and systematic techniques. In other words, I'm advocating working smarter, not harder.

TS: But what about tests and quizzes? Aren't they explicit, focused, and systematic enough to assess students' learning?

CRB: Sure they are, when they're used well. There are still some important differences, though, between those evaluation techniques and Classroom Assessment Techniques.

TS: Such as the cute names you give to the techniques, you mean?

CRB: No, I think there's more to it than that. Tests and quizzes usually come at the end of lessons or terms, and focus on how much students have learned. Right?

TS: Yes. So what?

CRB: Well, Classroom Assessment Techniques are meant to be used during the lessons, while students are actively engaged in the learning process—not after it's over. Classroom assessment also focuses on how and how well students are learning, not just on what and how much.

TS: Aren't you just advocating testing better, earlier, and more often?

CRB: I suppose some tests and quizzes would work quite well as formative assessment tools. But there are a lot of other things I want to know about: things we don't usually test for and things I don't necessarily want to grade for.

TS: You mean you want to know whether your students like you or not?

CRB: Don't be snide. We all want to know that. But I'm thinking more about assessing some very traditional goals that I have for my teaching, like fostering a deeper appreciation for the subject and developing critical-thinking skills.

TS: Amen. In your words, "We all want to know that." Even I have secret "higher-order" goals, but I don't think those kinds of things are assessable. I really don't believe you can collect meaningful data on those sorts of things.

CRB: Well, maybe my project will change your mind. Let's talk about this again at the end of the semester, and I'll show you the results of my assessments of analytic reasoning in my classes.

TS: O.K. If you show them to me over lunch, I'll even bring an open mind with me.

CRB: Fair enough. If neither of us expects miracles, there's a chance we might both be pleasantly surprised.

From Greek Political Philosophy (Philosophy)

As a way to assess students' understanding of the fundamental differences between Socrates' and Aristotle's views of the individual's role in political life, this philosophy professor asked students to work in pairs to create a short Invented Dialogue. Each pair was to invent a dialogue by juxtaposing selected quotes on citizenship and political involvement from Aristotle's Politics and from any of the several Socratic dialogues they had studied. All excerpts were to be correctly cited, of course. The instructor read and responded to the Invented Dialogues and asked the authors of three of the best to read their dialogues aloud in class.

From Shakespeare on Film (Fine Arts)

To assess her class's appreciation for the critical, necessary differences between staging Shakespeare's plays in the theater and presenting them on film, this art instructor asked students to come up with a short dialogue in which William Shakespeare and Orson Welles compared notes on their quite different "stagings" of Othello. (The class had read Othello, seen a traditional theatrical staging of it, and seen the restored versions of Welles's film.) Students were free to draw on any relevant sources, as long as the sources were carefully and correctly acknowledged. But the instructor let students know that they would need to exercise some "poetic license," especially in creating the Bard of Avon's lines.