For teachers, the evaluation of student learning is both personal and complex.

It is personal because it implies some type of judgment. The teacher, at least for the moment, places on hold the act of teaching and tries to determine how well learning has occurred. That determination, when connected to a grade, represents the teacher’s warranted opinion about the extent to which the student has met the objectives of the lesson. Teachers often struggle with this process for at least two reasons: First, it reduces a student’s (and teacher’s) efforts to a single number or letter. Second, it changes the relationship between the teacher and the student. The teacher transitions from the role of a facilitator, coach, and nurturer to that of a judge. The act of grading itself implies an impersonal rendering of a decision.

Student evaluation is also complex, and teachers are faced with questions such as, What should be tested? When should I assess student learning? How do I know my students are learning new concepts and skills? Are my assessments valid measures of student learning? How can I include my students in the evaluation process? These questions cannot be answered easily. Rather, they represent the essential questions of assessment—questions that good teachers ask themselves every day. They recognize that meaningful assessment is ongoing, cumulative, and communally constructed; that it is a conversation and a dialogue; that it is not an event or a product or a number.

Contemporary educational reform initiatives in the form of high-stakes standardized testing do not take into account the factors and issues listed above. From the perspective of the corporatized reformers, assessment is synonymous with test. Educators know that this is not accurate, that evaluation of student learning is not defined or measured so simply. Learning does not occur on a smooth upward plane. Understandings emerge slowly and suddenly and are demonstrated unevenly and in unexpected ways.

In our own classrooms, we grapple with the complexities of evaluation every day. We recognize that there are intricate interrelationships between and among the teacher, the student, and the content.

In this issue of English Journal, authors explore evaluation from a range of perspectives. Topics include the political, professional, and personal implications of high-stakes testing, the double-edged nature of the Common Core State Standards, and the connection between classroom assessments and standardized testing. Authors also explore alternatives to traditional paper-and-pencil tests including drawing, the application of video games, and the use of multimodal composition. Other articles focus on new approaches to formative assessment as a means to enhance the teaching/learning process.

Taken as a whole, this issue calls into question the efficacy of high-stakes testing as the primary means of gauging the effectiveness of teachers and of rating schools and school districts. These perspectives should give pause to anyone who is concerned about the direction of educational reform in this country and its effects on teaching and learning.