Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot: Get to Know Phoebe Winter

Development of Accessible Alternate Assessments

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About Advancing ALTELLA Snapshots

The Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot is feature series. Advancing ALTELLA Snapshots are short, informative articles that highlight experts, educators, and topics of interest.

Phoebe Winter:
THE FACTS

TITLE:
Consultant in Large-scale
Measurement Application
and Research

AREA OF INTEREST:
Development of
accessible alternate
assessments

Get to know Advancing ALTELLA expert: Phoebe Winter

Dr. Phoebe Winter has studied measurement, evaluation, and statistics. After beginning her career in state departments of education, she became interested in the connections between policy, psychometrics, and practice. She has been working as a consultant in the application and research of large-scale educational measurement with organizations, such as the Council of Chief State School Officers, for the past 25 years. Winter currently serves on advisory groups for state assessments, including English language proficiency and alternate English language proficiency assessments.

"My work has focused on strengthening the validity of uses and interpretations of results from educational measurements for all students, especially students with disabilities and multilingual learners, but also students who do not have an identified educational need," Winter says.

Winter has collaborated in the design and development of large-scale and classroom-based assessments that incorporate tools educators can use to better assess student knowledge, skills, and understanding. She has also developed guidelines for item templates that are used to assess the English language skills of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Her most recent work focuses on accessibility of assessments, particularly online and device-based assessments.

Winter suggests that assessments should be designed from the beginning so that they are flexible in how they are administered and in how students can respond. She emphasizes the importance of being prepared to adjust pilot and field testing when accessibility features are not working as intended and additional tools are needed. She recommends using cognitive labs, a method that includes observing and interviewing students and test administrators to understand how they experience test items.

"While cognitive labs can be resource-draining, careful design and consideration of what we want to learn from the cognitive

labs, timed appropriately in the development and design process, can provide invaluable information that saves resources in the long run. Small try-outs and pilot tests of targeted item types or of new ways of addressing constructs are relatively efficient ways to innovate and collect data on the efficacy of innovations," she says.

Another important consideration when developing assessments is distinguishing between the effects of a disability and the student's English language skills.

"One way to do that is by providing a wide range of tools and modalities for a student to use to demonstrate English language proficiency. It's exciting to see researchers and educators with expertise in linguistics, English learners, students with disabilities, and cognition working together to consider this important issue. I think their work will help us learn how to measure students' English language skills and help teachers support students in acquiring these skills," she says.

She also discusses the importance of involving individuals who are experts at developing assessments and experts at educating students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

"Item writers with expertise in educating students with significant cognitive disabilities and multilingual learners with disabilities, who have high expectations around what students can learn, working with experts in test design and item development, would be the ideal development scenario," Winter says. "Having joint and interactive item development, if possible, would allow writers to learn from each other. Training should include providing an understanding of the target population's skills, needs, and expectations for their education."

Winter thinks it is an exciting time to be in the field of educational measurement, as new technologies are emerging.

"The advent of computer and other device-involved testing provides us with ways to better assess the constructs we're trying to measure. I would like to see the field consider innovative approaches to measurement, beginning with considering how we would know a student's standing on a construct and then considering ways we might measure it. Although this is a tenet of principled test development, I think we tend to limit ourselves to available, familiar item types and platforms, partially out of practicality and limitations on resources. I will say that researchers and test developers working with English learners and students with disabilities are moving innovation forward," Winter says.

Phoebe Winter's recommendations for working with multilingual learners with significant cognitive disabilities

1. Before beginning to design and develop an alternate English language proficiency assessment, state the goals and purposes of the assessment and identify how you will use the scores. For example, the scores could be used to identify the student's strengths and to identify areas to support learning needs.
2. Don't assume limitations in the student's communication skills when designing the alternate English language proficiency assessment. However, alternate English language proficiency assessments should be designed for accessibility to allow students to respond in a variety of ways.
3. When developing assessments that are accessible for multilingual learners, you must carry out small-scale pilot testing and cognitive labs, and you need input from the individuals with expertise in educating multilingual students with the most significant cognitive disabilities
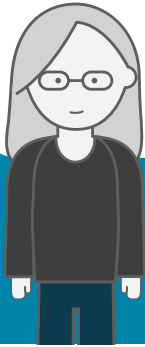
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