Classroom Assessment: Minute by Minute, Day by Day

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A large research base shows that implementing assessment for learning yields substantial improvement in student learning.

If educators are serious about using assessment to improve instruction, then we need more fine-grained assessments, and we need to use the information they yield to modify instruction as we teach.

- Assessment *for* learning involves adjusting teaching as needed while the learning is still taking place.
- The emphasis is on what the students are getting out of the process.
- When using assessment for learning, the divide between instruction and assessment blurs.
- Everything students do—such as conversing in groups, completing seatwork, answering and asking questions, working on projects, handing in homework assignments, even sitting silently and looking confused—is a potential source of information about how much they understand.
- The teacher who consciously uses assessment for learning takes in this information, analyzes it, and makes instructional decisions that address the understandings and misunderstandings that these assessments reveal.
- Research indicates that using assessment for learning improves student achievement.
- Improvements appeared to be consistent across countries (including Canada, England, Israel, Portugal, and the United States), as well as across age brackets and content areas.
- There is no one-size-fits-all package.

Five broad strategies for teachers of all content areas and at all grade levels:

1. Clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success.
2. Engineering effective classroom discussions, questions, and learning tasks.
3. Providing feedback that moves learners forward.
4. Activating students as the owners of their own learning.
5. Activating students as instructional resources for one another.

These strategies are nonnegotiable in that they define the territory of assessment for learning.

- Given the variability or ages and subjects, it is important to offer teachers a range of techniques for each strategy, making them responsible for deciding which techniques they will use and allowing them time and freedom to customize these techniques to meet the needs of their students.
- Many of techniques require only subtle changes in practice, yet research on the underlying strategies suggests that they have a high "gearing"—meaning that these small changes in practice can leverage large gains in student learning.
- The teaching practices that support these strategies are low-tech, low-cost, and usually feasible for individual teachers to implement.

Samples of techniques for implementing each of the five assessment-for-learning strategies.

1. Clarify and Share Intentions and Criteria
- Low achievement is often the result of students failing to understand what teachers require.
- One common method is circulating work samples in view of prompting a discussion about quality. Students decide which reports are good and analyze what's good about the good ones and what's lacking in the weaker ones.

2. **Engineer Effective Classroom Discussion**
- Many teachers spend a considerable proportion of their instructional time in whole-class discussion or question-and-answer sessions, but these sessions tend to rehearse existing knowledge rather than create new knowledge for students.
- Many teachers now spend more time planning instruction than grading student work.
- By thinking carefully about the questions they ask in class, teachers can check on students' understanding while still with the students.
- Teachers can also use questions to check on student understanding before continuing the lesson. We call this a "hinge point" in the lesson because the lesson can go in different directions, depending on student responses. By explicitly integrating these hinge points into instruction, teachers can make their teaching more responsive to their students' needs in real time.
- Many teachers have instituted the idea of "no hands up, except to ask a question."
- The teacher can either decide whom to call on to answer a question or use some randomizing device.
- This way, all students know that they need to stay engaged because the teacher could call on any one of them.
- To gauge the understanding of the whole class, the teacher needs to get responses from all the students in real time. i.e. white boards, A,B,C, D cards, or Personal Response System clickers are examples of tools to get whole class feedback.

3. **Provide Feedback That Moves Learners Forward**
- Use comments that address what the student needs to do to improve, linked to rubrics where appropriate.
- Once students engaged in self-assessment and peer assessment, teachers are able to be more selective about which elements of student work they look at, and they can focus on giving feedback that peers were unable to provide.

4. **Activate Students as Owners of Their Learning**
- This involves creating shared responsibility for learning.
- One simple technique is to distribute green and red "traffic light" cards, which students "flash" to indicate their level of understanding (green = understand, red = don't understand).
- Students also take ownership of their learning when they assess their own work, using agreed-on criteria for success (i.e. rubric)

5. **Activate Students as Instructional Resources for One Another**
- For many students, using a rubric to assess their own work is just too difficult.
- For that reason, peer assessment and feedback can be an important part of effective instruction.
- As students assess the work of a peer, they are forced to engage in understanding the rubric.
- Also, students tend to be more engaged when the feedback comes from a peer.
- Using peer and self-assessment techniques frees up teacher time to plan better instruction or work more intensively with small groups of students.
- Peer assessment should be focused on improvement, not on grading.

Using Evidence of Learning to Adapt Instruction

- Using the 5 strategies teachers can make on-the-fly decisions using the evidence they have elicited, they can make instructional decisions that they otherwise could not have made.
- Teachers using assessment for learning continually look for ways in which they can generate evidence of student learning, and they use this evidence to adapt their instruction.
- They share the responsibility for learning with the learners

Supporting Teacher Change

- Must support teachers in developing a deep and practical understanding of assessment for learning, through school-based teacher learning communities.
- Teachers are accountable because they know they will have to share their experiences with their colleagues. However, each teacher is also in control of what he or she tries out. Over time, the teacher learning community develops a shared language that enables teachers to talk to one another about what they are doing. Teachers build individual and collective skill and confidence in assessment for learning. Colleagues help them decide when it is time to move on to the next challenge as well as point out potential pitfalls.

OTHER READING RESOURCES

[Implementing Performance Based Assessments in the Classroom](#)

 Performance-based assessments "represent a set of strategies for the . . . application of knowledge, skills, and work habits through the performance of tasks that are meaningful and engaging to students.

[Assessment for Learning](#)

This curriculum insert from the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario focuses on assessment strategies that all classroom teachers will find useful. It is adapted from their *Learning Together: Successful teaching in combined grades.*

[RSU2: Entering a New Stage in Building a High Quality Proficiency-Based District](#)

 It takes a load of leadership and extra effort to transform a traditional district to personalized, proficiency-based learning. It's a steep learning curve to tackle.

[Moving Beyond Grade Driven Learning](#)

A huge topic as districts are converting to competency education but are still trying to teach students grade-level standards even when they know the students don't have prerequisite knowledge.

[Proficiency-Based Learning Simplified](#)

The Great Schools Partnership created Proficiency-Based Learning Simplified to help schools develop efficient [standards-based](#) systems that will prepare all students for success in the colleges, careers, and communities of the 21st century.

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