

ASSESSMENT *FOR* LEARNING DEFINED

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Assessment *FOR* learning turns the classroom assessment process and its results into an instructional intervention designed to increase, not merely monitor, student learning. Research evidence gathered in hundreds of studies conducted literally around the world over the past decade (detailed below) shows that the consistent application of principles of assessment *FOR* learning can give rise to unprecedented gains in student achievement, especially for perennial low achievers. The implications for such gains for achieving adequately yearly progress goals and closing achievement score gaps are profound.

To understand how these practices impact student learning, one must begin with a general sense of how assessment fits into instruction. We assess for two reasons: to inform instructional decisions and to motivate students to try to learn.

If assessment is, at least in part, the process of gathering information about student achievement to inform instructional decisions, then the key starting questions for any assessment are, what decisions, who's making them, and what information will be helpful to them? In the case of assessment *FOR* learning, the key question is, *what comes next in the learning?* The decision makers are *teachers and their students*. And, the information required centers on *where the student is now* in the progression of learning leading up to mastery of each academic achievement standard.

Key Features and Roles

Perhaps the most unique feature of the assessment *FOR* learning process is that it acknowledges the critical importance of the instructional decisions made by students and their teachers working as a team. In that context, students become consumers of assessment information too, using evidence of their own progress to understand what comes next for them.

Another unique feature is its reliance on standards-based curriculum maps cast both in student and teacher-friendly versions so that what has been learned and what comes next is clear to all throughout the learning. This leads directly to our second reason for assessing: If we assess to motivate students to try to learn, assessment *FOR* learning motivates by helping students watch themselves succeeding—by helping them believe that success is within reach if they keep trying.

Thus, it becomes clear that assessment *FOR* learning cannot happen just once a year or quarterly or even

weekly. It must continue throughout the learning. To accomplish this, the teacher's classroom assessment role must play out in five parts:

1. Become competent masters themselves of each of the standards their students are to master
2. Understand how those standards transform into the curriculum that forms the scaffolding students will climb on their journey up to each standard
3. Transform classroom-level achievement targets into student-friendly versions
4. Transform the classroom targets into high-quality classroom assessments capable of accurately reflecting student achievement
5. Use those assessments over time in collaboration with their students to help motivate them to keep learning

One strategy teachers rely on in assessment *FOR* learning classrooms, then, is to provide students with a clear vision of the learning target from the beginning of the learning, along with samples of strong and weak work so they can see a progression to competence laid out before them. Another is to provide students with continuous access to descriptive (versus evaluative or judgmental) feedback; that is, information that helps them see how to improve the quality of their work. This requires student engagement in repeated self assessments so they can watch themselves successfully negotiating the road to competence. Ultimately, then, students learn to generate their own descriptive feedback and to set goals for what comes next in their learning. Each of these specific practices draws the learner more deeply into taking responsibility for her or his own success.

The student's role in assessment *FOR* learning environments is to strive to understand what success looks like and to use each assessment to determine how to do better the next time. Assessments become more than one-time events attached onto the end of the teaching. They become part of the learning process by keeping students posted on their progress and confident enough to continue striving.

Balancing Key Differences

Assessment *FOR* learning is different from what historically has been referred to as formative assessment. If formative assessment is about more frequent, assessment *FOR* learning is about continuous. If

formative assessment is about providing teachers with evidence, assessment FOR learning is about informing students about themselves. If formative assessment tells users who is and is not meeting state standards, assessment FOR learning tells them what progress each student is making toward meeting each standard *while the learning is happening*—when there’s still time to be helpful.

Assessment FOR learning is obviously different from summative assessment, which asks, which students have reached the top of the scaffolding? These tests hold students and their teachers accountable for meeting required standards. They judge the sufficiency of learning at a particular point in time. Examples include large-scale, on-demand state and district assessments, as well as classroom assessments for report card grading.

In the perfect assessment system, one would seek to balance these assessment purposes. The foundation would be a continuous array of assessments FOR learning used to help students learn more—to lead them up the scaffolding. In addition, periodic early warning formative assessments would help teachers see student progress in terms of standards mastered, revealing to them with greater frequency as to who needs additional help. And finally, once-a-year accountability tests would serve to verify the ultimate level of student success.

What Research on Effects Tells Us

Student achievement improves dramatically when assessment FOR learning practices become a matter of routine in classrooms. Evidence gathered from across the globe consistently reveals effect sizes of a half to one and a half standard deviations and more can be directly attributable to the application of classroom assessment FOR learning.

1. In his original mastery learning research, Bloom and his students (1984) made extensive use of classroom assessment in support of learning and reported subsequent gains in student test performance of one to two standard deviations.
2. Black and Wiliam, in their 1998 watershed research review, synthesize over 250 studies from around the world on the impact of effective classroom assessment and report gains of a half to a full standard deviation, with the largest gains being realized by low achievers.
3. Meisels, et. al., (2003) involved students in performance assessments and report gains of over one and a half standard deviations on subsequent tests.
4. And finally, Rodriguez (2004) reports effects of similar size in U.S. TIMSS math performance arising from the effective management of classroom assessment. According to these researchers, the expected achievement score gains will rival in their impact on student

achievement the implementation of one-on-one tutorial instruction, with the largest gains being realized by the lowest achievers, thus reducing achievement gaps.

What Research on Current Practice Tells Us

Virtually all state licensing standards require, and every relevant professional association advocate the development of assessment literacy in schools. However, research in this area indicates that neither pre-service nor in-service teacher nor administrator training programs include this kind of training (Crooks, 1989; Stiggins, 1999; Shepard, et al., 2005). Very few teachers and almost no school leaders have been given the opportunity to learn about principles of sound assessment practice, especially of assessment FOR learning. Consequently, the conditions necessary for realizing the potential of these principles are not present:

- Educators are still unable to differentiate among the various information needs of assessment users,
- Achievement targets remain at the standards level versus the detailed level that provides scaffolding leading up to standards,
- The risk of inaccurate classroom assessments remains,
- Feedback is almost totally evaluative versus descriptive, and
- Students are rarely involved in the assessment, record keeping or communication process.

The Future

Will practitioners be given the opportunity to learn to assess FOR learning and engage the immense potential for informing and improving instruction and student achievement? Unless we provide a new vision and incentives to change, the answer may very well be no

However, the research and powerful new vision of assessment *FOR* learning can provide a new path. We know:

- What teachers and school leaders need to know to assess effectively,
- What will happen to student learning if they do so, and
- How to deliver the proper classroom assessment competence into their hands with professional development efficiency.

The challenge is to design and implement a course of action that will enable teachers to realize the promise of assessment FOR learning and engage students to become active participants in their own learning.

References

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