

Using Classroom Assessment to Guide Instruction

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Introduction to Using Classroom Assessment to Guide Instruction

Assessment comes in a wide variety of forms. It is the multiple-choice test or essay due at the end of a unit, the weekly spelling or math test, and daily homework. It is also what happens every day in the classroom—the continual communication between teacher and child that molds the lesson and helps students learn.

States throughout the country have adopted high-stakes standards. In Pennsylvania they are referred to as the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). We visited the Penn-Delco School District in Aston, Pennsylvania, while developing this video program and learned more about their educational and assessment practices.

Northley Middle School, in southeastern Pennsylvania, is surrounded by rolling hills and farmland and populated by families whose ties go back generations. Newer families come here to escape the hustle of nearby Philadelphia, raise their children, coach soccer games, and support the PTA. All of these working class parents expect their children to go to college, even if they didn't.

Evidence of Learning

Everything that happens in the classroom is potential evidence that children are learning. Evidence consists of observations, products, and what students communicate in conversations. Colleen Miller, a sixth grade math teacher at Northley, believes that using multiple assessment strategies provides a comprehensive picture of each child. Some students are more adept at paper-and-pencil tests, while others work better with manipulatives. No single assessment can accurately measure every child's talents and abilities.

To that end, Ms. Miller takes time each day to observe and interact with her students. "I walk around the room. . . . I like to see that they are engaged through watching their body language, seeing them listening to their peers, going back and forth between the problems and the examples that we've given in the class. In addition to that, I like to see the students volunteering in class, sharing their information with me. That gives me a sense of how well certain students or the entire class have grasped a concept."

Ms. Miller also uses exit cards, a brief half-page questionnaire that reviews the day's lesson, every day. "The purpose of exit cards is for me to reassure the students as they leave my room that they did a good job. In addition, they are reassuring me that they have grasped onto the concept of the lesson. It helps me to see them achieve success as well as

modify my plans for the next class.” The assessments are a catalyst for crafting instruction that helps each student make the most of his or her unique talents and skills.

As principal of Northley Middle School, Ernest Angiolillo has had the opportunity to observe Ms. Miller in action. “We often say teaching is an art in the sense that teachers need to think on their feet a lot. And this is exactly what you get when you tune into the students’ assessment cues. Sometimes you may get the cue that this lesson is not working the way you intended it to. So you have to be able to think on your feet and move in a different direction.”

It is a challenge for teachers to modify instruction when it appears to them that students are not achieving as well as they should. Mr. Angiolillo explains, “Sometimes the temptation is to say, ‘well they’re simply not studying hard enough or they’re not working hard enough or they’re not paying attention enough.’ And the challenge for a teacher is to go deeper and to look around and find ways that can help that instruction get to the students better.”

That often means providing the students with successful exercises that gently lead them to the educational goal. Because not all students are good test takers, providing varied assessment tools helps every student share what he has learned in a way that suits his personal comfort and strength. Confidence is the key to student success.

Teachers “understand [that] the more successful the kids feel, the better they’ll be,” says Mr. Angiolillo. “But you have to be willing to have the students take a risk. That is, you have to be willing to have the students be wrong. There’s that inborn feeling that teachers have, that ‘I cannot let them be wrong. I must lead them to the right answer.’” Students who take risks have confidence in themselves and trust in their teacher. They have learned that no one is an expert the first time they try something. Mr. Angiolillo believes that the student who takes a risk and is willing to allow herself to be wrong will master a subject much more quickly than someone else who doesn’t take a risk. Teachers “need, sometimes, to allow the students to lead themselves to the right answer.”

Assessment Strategies—Then and Now

Assessing students on a daily basis has not always been the norm. For many years, assessment meant a test at the end of a unit. Day after day, the teacher stood at the front of the room instructing. After a period of time, perhaps at the end of the chapter, students took a test. There was instruction time and test time. It was compartmentalized. Students

learned through the measurement tool what kind of information was valued. If the assessment was a multiple-choice test, students concluded that memorizing facts was an important skill.

The world our children will graduate into requires more than a highly tuned short-term memory, explains Chris Stewart, director of the English and History Curriculum Framework Project of the Washington, D.C. public schools. They need to identify the steps necessary to perform a task, know how to acquire the information and skills to successfully complete it, and be creative when confronting obstacles. “A fundamental purpose of assessment is to provide teachers with the information they need to help students hone these skills,” says Stewart (Checkley, 1997).

For teachers, a crucial assessment occurs at the outset of a unit. This assessment may be formal, such as a written test, or informal, such as a conversation. Teachers then know if their lesson starts at the right point for the class and who is most likely to need additional instruction to be up to speed. Assessing throughout the unit prompts teachers to make curriculum adjustments based on current information.

In the videos accompanying the workshops in this guide, participants will watch teachers using some unique strategies. Workshop participants will watch teachers using questioning and observation to assess students’ understanding during a lesson. Teachers in the videos will show how they use exit cards at the end of a class, graphic organizers, peer review, one-on-one conferencing, self-reflection, and student designed rubrics to assess their students.

Sixth grade math teacher Ms. Miller quickly modifies her instruction if she sees a lack of understanding. “If I see that the students had difficulty explaining why we need order of operations, I might do a follow-up lesson on the importance of following orders. For example, we might have mixed up instructions for something, like baking a cake, and they’re going to have to put it in order and explain why that order is important to their success.”

Teachers in the videos discuss their best practices and show viewers how they adjust instruction based on daily assessments. At the end of the workshops, participants will be able to answer the following questions: How can I modify instruction immediately? What assessments are best for my teaching style and subject? How can I adjust classroom instruction to meet the needs of all learners? How can I reteach those falling behind? How will daily adjustments to the curriculum affect long-term teaching goals?

Standards and Their Effect on Daily Instruction

With an ever-increasing emphasis on meeting state academic achievement standards, teachers must have opportunities to translate the standards into instructional plans. A standard becomes useful to teachers only when they know what it means and can convert it to classroom achievement targets.

“Our classroom assessments are tied to district initiatives,” explains John Hartman, Principal of Coebourn Elementary School. “We’re creating templates that align with state standards, and of course align with national standards. We evaluate our standardized testing data; we look at the turnover; and we look at our PSSA. What we try to do is assure that our curriculum-embedded assessments make sense in that they relate to the standardized assessments that are wrapped around the standards.”

“Each teacher has to look at the standards according to the different grade levels and try to find assessments that relate to the specific standards for that grade level,” says Leslye Abrutyn, superintendent of the Penn-Delco School District. “It’s really a matter of starting at the end and moving backwards and consistently stepping back until you get into the classroom.” In reviewing each standard, teachers must determine what objectives are prerequisites for accomplishing the goal. What are the knowledge and skill building blocks that students need before teaching to the standard? “And then of course,” Abrutyn says, “the key is to have the very best assessment techniques for the classroom.”

The Penn-Delco School District

The Penn-Delco School District chose to focus on five areas of effective writing in this year’s district writing assessment. The five areas of effective writing are

- Focus—student writing should have a single controlling point with an awareness of mode.
- Content—student should develop ideas through facts, examples, opinions, reasons, details, anecdotes, and explanations.
- Organization—student should arrange content in a way that sustains a logical order with transitions, including an introduction, body, and conclusion.
- Style—student’s word choice and sentence structure should contribute to the writer’s voice (tone) and the voice should be appropriate to the audience.

- Conventions—student should display control of grammar, spelling, usage, punctuation, and sentence formation.

Writing samples were collected in the fall and then scored from 1 to 5 for each area, or “domain.” After the pre-assessment, teachers selected a domain that needed development and planned mini-lessons to improve student writing. Once students improved in that domain, they moved on to the next. Teachers modified instruction based on the success of the mini-lessons.

“Most of the time when I modify instruction, it’s done immediately,” says Andrea Fulginiti, a third grade teacher at Coebourn Elementary School, a feeder school for Northley Middle. “You can tell by their faces. When you get the blank stare or the puzzled look or the eyebrows that come together, you know that we’ve got to go over this again.” At that point, Ms. Fulginiti tries a different approach. “We may do something with a drawing; we may do something with a picture. If directions aren’t very clear to someone and I’ve said it two or three times in different ways, I’ll say, ‘does anyone else know how I could explain this?’ ”

Written assessments take more time. It’s harder to immediately assess what students know and don’t know. With oral communication a teacher can see who understands and who needs more guidance. According to Ms. Fulginiti, “It’s easier; it’s faster to use oral communication to do assessments if you need to understand what they know on the spot. Third graders are very good at telling you things.”

It’s easy to write grades down after reviewing a written assignment or test, but what does a teacher do with assessments gained through observation? “You need to keep really good records,” says Ms. Fulginiti. “I’ll write something down in my grade book: ‘so and so is doing really well. Needs to focus more attention on quotation marks. Needs to focus on capital letters and periods.’” Sometimes, one word is all that’s needed. “Jason does a great job in style but there’s no focus, so I’ll write ‘focus,’ I know that I have to watch Jason and make sure he’s staying focused.” Finding the time to write notes is always a challenge.

The variety of assessments available to teachers is only limited by their creativity. Along with formal tests and informal conversations, students can engage in group projects; write journals; create exhibitions, models, or presentations; write stories; perform plays; or design their own tests. The key is developing assessments that will improve teaching and learning.

Eleanor Roosevelt High School

Another site we will feature in this program is Eleanor Roosevelt High School, the second largest high school in Maryland. It's a science and technology magnet school with a largely African American population. Principal Sylvester Conyers has been an educator for 27 years. He stresses the importance of teaching students decoding skills they can use to improve their performance on standardized tests as well as classroom assignments. "If I read a question, I may think it's going to ask you one thing; you may interpret it totally differently based upon whatever experiences you bring to the table at that point in time," says Conyers. "The school's point of emphasis is providing many, many opportunities for students to learn how to decode questions, especially on assessments, so that they can be successful. When we as teachers work with our young people, we ask 'What do you think this question is asking you?' And more importantly, what is considered a good answer, what's considered a fair answer, and what's considered a poor answer?"

Along with learning decoding skills, students benefit by understanding how to gauge their own performance. Students need to know how much they know, how much they understand, and how much they can do. "When a project comes to a close, it's not very helpful to just give students a grade—that doesn't tell them much," Stewart explains. "What is helpful is to guide them through the project, giving them opportunities to refine their products during the process" (Checkley, 1997).

Not helping students learn how to gauge their performance can be costly to them, Stewart says. "In school, students often get [second] chances to perform." For example, if a student fails a class she can usually take it over again. "In real life, poor performance may cost you a job, or a promotion." When assessment and feedback is embedded throughout the learning experience, what students produce in the end should be much better (Checkley, 1997).

Purpose of the Program

This video program and facilitator's guide are designed for teachers who seek to strengthen their knowledge and skills regarding the effect of assessment on classroom instruction. The program can be used to introduce principals, staff developers, resource teachers, and professors in teaching preparation programs to a wide variety of assessment tools, the challenges of developing assessments to meet the needs of different learners, the importance of modifying daily instruction based on

classroom assessments, and the effect of district standards on classroom assessments.

The workshops in this guide are designed to stimulate exploration, discussion, and sharing in a collaborative setting. An individual may also use the videos and exercises for personal reflection and growth. Both the workshop and individual settings are designed to enable participants to (1) use a wider variety of assessment methods in the classroom, and (2) use assessment results to craft daily instruction.

The three videos in this program examine a wide variety of classroom assessment techniques, how several excellent teachers use classroom assessment to guide their daily instruction, and how state- and districtwide assessments affect the classroom.

About the Program

Tape 1—*Techniques for Classroom Assessment*

In this age of standards and accountability, with so much attention being showered on test scores, how can teachers embrace student individuality in the assessment process? *Techniques for Classroom Assessment* offers an overview of assessment strategies and their importance in guiding daily instruction. The teachers highlighted in the video share their approaches to designing assessments for their classes, which assessments they find most comfortable, and how they use assessments to guide instruction.

Tape 2—*The Assessment-Instruction Link*

How do teachers use classroom assessment to guide their daily instruction? *The Assessment-Instruction Link* takes us into the classroom and into the minds of several teachers who discuss why it's important to assess their students frequently, how they decide which assessment techniques to use, how they modify instruction based on what they learn from the assessments, and how they cope with time-management challenges.

Tape 3—*The Role of Classroom Assessment in School Improvement*

How do district and state assessments affect classroom assessments? In the third video, we broaden the scope and see how classroom assessment directly correlates to the bigger assessment picture. We'll look at how teachers are using district and state standards to design classroom assessments, how classroom assessment relates both to a student's report card grades and to high-stakes assessments, and how a district supports