

# ASSESSMENT AS LEARNING

Using Classroom Assessment  
to Maximize Student Learning

Second Edition

Lorna M. Earl



---

# Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Chapter 1. The Promise and Challenge of Classroom Assessment</b>	<b>1</b>
The Educational World Has Changed	2
The Power of Classroom Assessment	3
Why a Second Edition?	3
The Case of Understanding Mathematics Learning and Assessment	7
Using This Book	8
Ideas for Follow Up	9
<b>Chapter 2. Situating Assessment Changes</b>	<b>11</b>
A Brief History of Assessment	11
Looking for Change in all the Wrong Places	17
Rethinking Assessment for Real Change	18
Purpose Is Everything	19
Classroom Assessment and Large-Scale Reform	21
Taking Up the Challenge	22
Ideas for Follow Up	23
<b>Chapter 3. Assessment of Learning, for Learning, and as Learning</b>	<b>25</b>
Assessment <i>for</i> Learning	27
Assessment <i>as</i> Learning	28
Assessment <i>of</i> Learning	29
Getting the Balance Right	30
Ideas for Follow Up	33

<b>Chapter 4. Spotlight on Learning</b>	<b>35</b>
Learning Makes Us Human	35
How People Learn	38
Learning for Understanding	40
Leaning Is Hard Work	43
Learning Happens in Context	47
Ideas for Follow Up	48
<b>Chapter 5. Assessment and Learning</b>	<b>49</b>
The Contribution of Classroom Assessment to Learning	50
Assessment as an Integral Part of Teaching and Learning	52
Realizing the Power of Assessment to Optimize Learning	54
Ideas for Follow Up	55
<b>Chapter 6. Using Assessment to Identify What They Believe Is True</b>	<b>57</b>
The Case of the Pool Table	58
Start With What They Believe Is True	60
The Case of the Bog	61
Ideas for Follow Up	76
<b>Chapter 7. Using Assessment to Motivate Learning</b>	<b>77</b>
Assessment That Motivates	78
The Case of Othello	80
Assessment to Reverse Socialization	85
Ideas for Follow Up	86
<b>Chapter 8. Using Assessment to Make Connections</b>	<b>87</b>
Curriculum as Visible Targets for Learning	89
Plan Learning, Plan Assessment, and Expect the Unexpected	91
The Case of Planned Literacy Learning	92
Differentiation	95
Ideas for Follow Up	96
<b>Chapter 9. Using Assessment to Extend Learning</b>	<b>97</b>
Feedback for Learning	97
Rubrics and Exemplars as Tools	102
The Case of the Brass Band	103
Ideas, Connections, and Extensions (ICE)	105
Ideas for Follow Up	107
<b>Chapter 10. Using Assessment for Reflection and Self-Regulation</b>	<b>109</b>
The Case of Jojo	110

Students as Their Best Assessors	111
Developing Self-Regulating Habits of Mind	111
The Case of Choices	116
Ideas for Follow Up	118
<b>Chapter 11. Getting to Assessment for Optimum Learning</b>	<b>119</b>
It's About Learning and It's About Time	121
The Spirit of Assessment for Learning Requires	
Conceptual Change	122
Think About What You Believe Is True	122
Learn About Learning	123
Know Your Subject	124
Be an Expert Teacher	125
Work Together in Collaborative Inquiry	126
Don't Give Up, But Be Gentle With Yourself	128
Self-Regulation for You Too	129
Get the Support You Need	130
Put It all Together	130
<b>References</b>	<b>133</b>

---

# 1

## The Promise and Challenge of Classroom Assessment

**W**hen I wrote the first edition of this book, I had worked for almost 30 years with teachers and administrators in schools and districts in the province of Ontario, Canada, as a colleague, researcher, and critical friend. My work took me into classrooms and staff rooms, into marking sessions and student-led conferences, into professional development sessions and teacher discussion groups. Since that time, I have been privileged to spend time in classrooms and schools in a wide range of countries. I have also worked in and for government in Ontario, England, and New Zealand, as well as in academe at the Ontario Institute for Education at the University of Toronto. In all of the venues, I have been a student of the ways and means of classroom assessment, trying to understand how it works and its value and place in teaching and learning. Each of these experiences has reinforced my conviction that classroom assessment, done well, is a very powerful tool for achieving high-level learning for all students. I also realize how important it is to get it right and how hard that is.

## The Educational World Has Changed

A great deal has happened since the first edition in 2003 that makes it even more critical for educators everywhere to understand the power that they hold to use classroom assessment for the highest educational purpose—learning for all students.

Assessment is not the only arena for change in education. Educational reform in the past several decades has been a roller-coaster ride for most teachers and schools. Schools reflect the changes that are occurring more broadly in the society, and there seems to be no end to the changes (economic, cultural, and political) that schools are expected to keep up with, or even lead. Education is at the center of most government reform agendas, with a focus on curriculum, standards, accountability, quality, equity, and many other contested areas. In particular, standards-based reform has taken hold around the world.

Teachers and administrators are caught in the middle of what often appear to be conflicting and countervailing demands, struggling to maintain their balance. They are expected to navigate their passage through the unrest and uncertainty about how schools should be organized, about whom should run them, about what should be taught, about how to teach, and about how assessment should occur. At the same time, they are expected to continue to exert their professional influence by staying abreast of advances in understanding human learning and effective schools. The prospects are daunting, but the possibilities are compelling.

In all of this change, assessment has become complicated, especially because there are many forms of assessment and myriad purposes that assessment is intended to serve. In this book, I am focusing on classroom assessment, the kind of assessment that happens every day in classrooms everywhere. Certainly, there are other kinds of assessment in education (some of which I talk about in Chapter 2), but the focus in this book is on what teachers and students do, what they can do, how they think, and how they might think about routine classroom assessment as an inextricable part of learning.

There is no single activity called “classroom assessment.” It incorporates a constellation of purposes, formats, and audiences. Wilson’s (1996) perspective on the purposes of assessment is still true. He maintained that classroom assessment must satisfy many goals—providing feedback to students, offering diagnostic information for the teacher to use, providing summary information for recordkeeping, proffering evidence for reports, and directing efforts at curriculum

and instructional adaptations. These purposes exist side by side, and some inherent tensions make contradictions in classroom assessment processes unavoidable. The challenge that teachers and administrators face is how to untangle the issues that are embedded in these tensions and formulate plans that honor the complexity of the assessment process, in ways that made sense to them.

## **The Power of Classroom Assessment**

Why focus on classroom assessment? Very simply, because it has incredible potential to change teaching and learning. Repeatedly, research studies have demonstrated that, if learning is the goal, assessment for learning is very powerful.

Recent reviews of more than 4,000 research investigations show clearly that when [formative assessment] is well implemented in the classroom, it can essentially double the speed of student learning . . . it is clear that the process works, it can produce whopping gains in students' achievement, and it is sufficiently robust so that different teachers can use it in diverse ways, yet still get great results with their students. (Popham, 2011, p. 2)

It is clear from this body of research that formative assessment, done well, is very powerful. But researchers are also finding repeatedly that this kind of assessment is not evident or is only superficial in most classrooms (James & Pedder, 2006; Popham, 2011). In this edition, I have tried to highlight the value of carefully planned assessment tasks and approaches for student learning and unpack why it is so hard to embed this kind of assessment into classroom practice.

## **Why a Second Edition?**

This book is about classroom assessment—The ideas in this book come from my musings, observations, and conversations with students and teachers; from hours of reading the burgeoning research evidence; and from discussions with people around the world who are struggling with the same issues. Consequently, this book is premised on the beliefs and assumptions about the nature and purpose of schooling and the role of teaching and of assessment in the learning process that I have come to accept. The major and most dramatic

assumption is that assessment can and should be much more than a check on learning that comes at the end. It is an integral part of the learning process that, all too often, has been ignored. Historically, educational assessment has largely been assessment *of* learning, designed to accredit or judge the work of students. Sometimes it has been assessment *for* learning, with feedback loops to ensure that students are given cues to review their learning and move forward. Assessment *as* learning goes even deeper, however, and draws on the role of personal monitoring and challenging of ideas that are embedded in the learning process and the role of both students and teachers in fostering this self-regulation process. When I wrote the original edition published in 2003, I introduced the notion of Assessment *as* Learning to

reinforce the role of formative assessment by emphasizing the role of the student, not only as a contributor to the assessment and learning process, but the critical connector between them. The student is the link. Students, as active, engaged and critical assessors can make sense of information, relate it to prior knowledge, and master the skills involved. This is the regulatory process in meta-cognition. It occurs when students personally monitor what they are learning and use the feedback from this monitoring to make adjustments, adaptations and even major changes in what they understand. Assessment as learning is the ultimate goal, where students are their own best assessors. (Earl, 2003, p. 47)

I have been troubled, however. I was experiencing the same phenomena as other researchers. People didn't seem to get it. Even when the book was being used as a text for initial teacher training, formative assessment was being interpreted as having routine assessments throughout a course to track students' progress, or techniques such as exit cards or stoplights, without using the assessment to identify misunderstandings and misconceptions or to engage students in thinking about their learning. Teachers who espoused their belief in assessment for learning used many of the techniques associated with assessment for learning, including peer and self-assessment, but they were mostly being used as mini-assessments that were practice for a final summative assessment or classroom management tools. I have seen this pattern repeatedly in primary schools and in secondary schools, in many different places around the world.

This edition of *Assessment As Learning* comes from my consternation about the challenge of realizing the potential of assessment to



optimize learning. My purpose remains the same, to provide teachers and school leaders who are struggling with and trying to come to grips with the conflict that they feel in relation to assessment with some alternate perspectives and beliefs about the role that classroom assessment can play in the daily working of schools and classrooms, with real examples of how teachers are making assessment work to enhance student learning. Many of the images are unchanged. I have tried in the commentary to make the process clearer and to identify the conflicts that have to be resolved for them to be powerful catalysts for learning.

*Assessment as learning* is not superficial change. It is a fundamental shift in thinking about teaching and about assessment and about the relationship between them. I hope the ideas in this book can help ignite the conversations that can build a deeper understanding of the role that assessment can play in learning and what teachers need to know and to do to undertake the challenging task of using assessment to optimize student learning.

Navigating the nuances and challenges of making classroom assessment serve learning requires more than tinkering with practice. It means that teachers and administrators are having to rethinking their beliefs about issues as lofty as “What are schools for?” “Who do schools serve?” and “What is our professional role in creating the schools we need?”

Hedley Beare (2001), an Australian researcher, identified the following categories of futures for education and for societies as a whole:

- *Possible futures*—things that could happen, although many of them are unlikely
- *Probable futures*—things that probably will happen, unless something is done to turn events around
- *Preferred futures*—things that you prefer to have happen and/or what you would like to plan to happen

He also issued a challenge to educators everywhere when he stated that it is possible to take deliberate actions to maximize the chance of achieving preferred futures—for young people, for the teaching profession, for schools and for societies. We each need to take time to decide what it is that we believe education is for and what role assessment should play. Not because someone tells us, or the rules dictate, but because we believe it is right and just. Once we have an image of the future we prefer, getting there is possible. It may be difficult; we may have to change, to learn, to live in dissonance, and to stand firm on our beliefs. But it is possible.