

CHAPTER

1

Classroom Assessment: Every Student a Winner!

The teaching profession is a calling, a calling with the potential to do enormous good for students. Although we haven't traditionally seen it in this light, assessment plays an indispensable role in fulfilling our calling. Used with skill, assessment can motivate the unmotivated, restore the desire to learn, and encourage students to keep learning, and it can actually create—not simply measure—increased achievement.

None of this happens if assessment functions solely as an accountability measure, as it does in the case of standardized testing and in determining grades. Because we now understand that assessment can work in positive ways to benefit learning, the time is right to add to our definition of good teaching *the skillful use of assessment—doing it right and using it well*.

Four authors will speak to you in this book—Rick, Judy, Jan, and Steve—collectively representing years of experience with educational measurement, classroom assessment, teaching, staff development, and administration. You may hear our individual voices as you read, but we have a single message throughout: The paramount assessment responsibility we share as educators is to protect students' well-being through use of sound practices. In this program of study, we offer the tools needed to ensure that the good you do in your teaching is joined with and made more powerful by the good you do in assessing.

Communicate Results How? In a Timely and Understandable Manner

Even if learning targets and information needs are clear and the information gathered is precisely accurate, an assessment can fail to achieve its learning ends if the results are not communicated effectively to the intended user(s). If we use test scores to convey results and the users don't understand how the score connects to learning or if we use symbols such as letter grades on a report card when users have a different idea what those symbols mean, we communicate ineffectively and poor-quality decisions, decisions harmful to students, can result.

To prevent such problems, we recommend these guidelines for good communication:

- Everyone must understand the meaning of the achievement target.
- The information underpinning the communication must be accurate.
- Everyone must understand the symbols being used to convey information.
- The communication must be tailored to the intended audience, e.g., level of detail, timing, and format.

Chapter 9 discusses these guidelines more fully; Chapters 10–13 apply them to various communication options—grading, portfolios, conferences, and standardized tests.

Involve Students—Make Assessment Instruction

Student involvement is a critically important shift in our traditional or conventional perspectives regarding the role of assessment in promoting effective schools: the most important instructional decisions (that is, the decisions that contribute the most to student learning) are made, not by the adults working in the system, but by students themselves. Students decide whether the learning is worth the effort required to attain it. Students decide whether they believe they are capable of reaching the learning targets. It is only after our students make these decisions in the affirmative that we, their teachers, can impact their learning lives. So part of our classroom assessment job is to keep students believing in themselves as learners through the effective use of classroom assessment.

The point is not that we adults don't contribute immensely to student learning. We do. We are critical players in teaching, learning, and assessment. It's just that we are second in the rank order of importance as instructional decision makers.

Each chapter includes concrete examples of how to involve students in classroom assessment, record keeping, and communication. Chapter 2 describes the research that

DEEPEN UNDERSTANDING

Activity 3.3 Identifying Reasoning Verbs

What kinds of reasoning do you want your students to be able to do? Make a list of all reasoning verbs that come to mind.

Inductive and Deductive Reasoning

Induction and deduction both require inference, and to understand them, we need to be clear about what it means to infer. The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines *infer* in this way: “deduce or conclude (information) from evidence and reasoning, rather than from explicit statements” (Jewell & Abate, 2001 p. 896). An inference, therefore, is a reasonable guess based on information, sometimes called, “reading between the lines.”

When we reason *inductively*, we use particular facts or evidence to infer a general rule or principle. Sound inductive reasoning requires that we select relevant facts or evidence, interpret them accurately, and then draw careful conclusions based on them.

When we reason *deductively*, we begin with a general rule or principle and from that we infer a specific conclusion or solution. Sound deductive reasoning requires that we apply what the general rule tells us to a specific case and draw a plausible conclusion about that specific case. For example, consider the general rule, “All people get mad sometimes.” We can therefore conclude, “Mom is a person; therefore, Mom gets mad sometimes.”

Analytical Reasoning

When we reason analytically, we examine the components or structure of something. Analysis often requires that we investigate how the component parts relate to each other or how they come together to form a whole. We might ask students to analyze a controversial decision, wherein they identify the arguments for and against a particular action. We might ask them to conduct an experiment to analyze a compound to determine its component chemicals. Students engage in analysis when they determine the meaning of unknown words by breaking them into prefixes, suffixes, and root words. We undertake analysis to understand something more deeply or to provide an interpretation of it. For students to be successful at such tasks, they must be able to identify the parts of something and then have practice at describing relationships among those parts, or between the part and the whole.

Selecting from Among the Formats

Each of the item types has its proper uses. Table 5.3 details strengths and weaknesses of multiple-choice, true/false, matching, and short answer fill-in, test formats.

Table 5.3 Comparison of Selected Response Item Types

ITEM TYPE	USED WHEN	ADVANTAGE	LIMITATIONS
Multiple Choice	There is only one right answer. There are several plausible alternatives to the correct answer.	Can measure a variety of objectives. Easy to score. Can cover lots of material efficiently. Carefully crafted distracters can provide diagnostic information.	Guessing can skew score (up to 33% chance, depending on number of distracters). Can be hard to identify plausible distracters.
True/False	A large domain of content is to be tested, requiring the use of many test items.	Can ask many questions in a short time. Easy to score.	Can be trivial or misleading if not written carefully. Guessing can skew score (50% chance).
Matching	There are many related thoughts or facts; you want to measure association of information.	Can cover lots of material efficiently. Easy to score. Can serve as several multiple-choice items in one (each response is a distracter for the others).	Process of elimination can skew score if not written carefully.
Short Answer or Fill in the Blank	A clear, short answer is required. You want to determine if students know the answer, rather than if they can select it from a list.	Assesses production of a response. Reduces the possibility of getting the right answer by guessing. Can cover lots of material efficiently.	Takes longer to score.

Guidelines for Writing Quality Items

We offer here the commonsense guidelines that test developers use to ensure item quality.¹ The first set of guidelines applies to all item types, and the rest are specific to each particular format. Before reading them, you may want to take the short test in Activity 5.5.

TRY THIS

Activity 8.2 Generate Oral Questions

Refer to the list of learning targets that you created in Activity 8.1. Choose one and list several questions you could ask to determine students' preexisting knowledge of the topic, and/or generate different levels of reasoning about the topic. If you are working with a learning team, share your questions and refine them. Try them out and report your observations and conclusions.

TRY THIS

Activity 8.3 Practice Questioning Strategies

In this chapter, we have suggested various questioning strategies—use of wait time, ways to encourage all students to respond to questions, and modeling the types of responses we want from students. Individually, or with your learning team, make a checklist of one or more of these strategies you want to practice in the classroom. Videotape or watch each other during a questioning session. Analyze the videotapes for instances when the targeted questioning strategies were used well and when an opportunity for a questioning strategy was missed.

This activity can be expanded to include students as questioners and as observers and evaluators of questioning strategies.

Conferences and Interviews

Some student-teacher conferences serve as structured or unstructured audits of student achievement in which the objective is to talk about what students have learned and have yet to learn. We converse with students about their levels of achievement; levels of comfort with the material they are to master; specific needs, interests, and desires; or any other achievement-related topics that contribute to an effective teaching and learning environment.