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Getting Started

Assessment has always been an integral component of education, but the stakes have changed. For decades, one of the primary purposes of the assessments used by regions and schools was to rank order students to assist in tracking them into either a tertiary institution or a vocational training program. Now, all educators are responsible for evaluating student progress in terms of mastery of standards designed by each state to prepare students for 21st century skills. Standards are the skills and knowledge that students need to know at different points in their academic careers. The statewide accountability assessments are aligned to these standards. There is now a push for an Australia-wide, standardised mathematics curriculum and associated standards. In 2006, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), the Australian Education Systems Official Committee (AESOC) and Curriculum Corporation developed and published Standards of Learning, covering Mathematics, English, Science, Information and Communication Technology, and Civics and Citizenship, in order to define common curriculum content and move towards common, shared standards and assessment.

The movement toward standards-based assessment has led to a major paradigm shift in the way educators plan, instruct and evaluate their students. All aspects of curriculum, instruction and assessment must be aligned to a series of standards. This is often a challenge for both veteran teachers who have been in the classrooms for years and for new teachers just beginning their careers. For many, the emphasis on accountability has led to a more stressful environment where it seems all energies are targeted at statewide assessments. These changes have left many students and parents, as well as teachers, confused and uncertain about the intended objectives and exactly what students are to know and be able to do.

Over the past few years, educational research has targeted the most effective ways to improve student achievement. One significant area of research is in effective classroom assessment practices. Effective classroom assessment happens when educators understand the importance of using high-quality assessments during all phases of learning; this is referred to as one aspect of Assessment Literacy. Student achievement improves when assessment is seen as both an instructional tool during the learning process, as well as an accountability tool to determine if learning has occurred (Stiggins, 2003).

Educators must practise the attributes of assessment literacy by gathering dependable information about student achievement, using various assessment methods, and interpreting the results to promote and encourage student growth. Teachers should use formative assessment to gather information about individual students during the learning process and use this information to guide and adjust

instruction. Teachers also should use summative assessments for accountability and to demonstrate where students are at a particular point in time in regard to specific knowledge and skills.

Assessment can be defined as the information-gathering process that creates a conduit for feedback about student understanding. Ongoing assessment during the instructional process informs teachers and students and provides a means for identifying gaps and misconceptions, allowing for appropriate and immediate interventions. For students, the feedback from teachers or peers creates a culture in which assessment becomes a tool to guide them in metacognitive reflection about their learning in relation to intended expectations (NMSA, 2006). This assessment process places students at the centre of their own learning and success. A student-centred classroom approach is essential to exemplary practice in middle years education.

Research has proven that when classroom assessment practices, both summative and formative, are implemented effectively, the students showing the greatest gains are those who typically perform at the lower level of achievement measures (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Effective assessment practices actually close learning gaps. Furthermore, effective classroom assessment practices not only require educators to be assessment literate, they also place more responsibility for learning on the individual student. Engaged students take ownership of their learning and become the centre of their own success. When the classroom culture becomes one of support and encouragement, students are more likely to take risks and expand their own learning. When the instructional relationship between student and teacher tightens, the goal of maximising student learning is more likely to be realised.

An Overview of the Content

This resource contains readings, materials and activities designed to engage teams of teachers in self-reflection and discussions about their current assessment practices. The goal of this experience is for teachers to come away with an understanding of the value of linking their assessment practices with their classroom instructional practices. Each of the modules includes background information about its content, activities and tasks. The modules are designed to engage participants in reflection on their current instructional practices and to encourage discussions with peers about effective ways of improving their classroom assessment practices. Each of the modules has a primary focus supported by research, and provides links to published articles and references to other related publications. This publication is ultimately a blueprint for a professional inquiry process that enables individuals and teams of educators to learn about effective classroom assessment, to reflect on current practices, and to discuss their own findings and their own discovered ways to improve assessment practices.

Module I—Assessment, Standards and Targets:

Part 1 provides a basic understanding of assessment and the distinct characteristics of summative and formative assessment. Part 2 looks at the relationship between standards, curriculum, instruction and assessment. The tasks help to deepen the understanding of assessment and the role of standards and targets in the classroom.

Module II—Assessment Methods and Item Design:

Part 1 shares information about the variety of assessments that are available and their appropriate uses. Part 2 discusses item design— i.e. the construction of an item. The tasks demonstrate the value of different assessment methods and the importance of good item construction.

Module III—Instructional Assessment in the Classroom:

Part 1 provides an understanding of formative assessment as an instructional practice. Part 2 describes the importance of multiple data-gathering sources. Part 3 presents the essential strategy of descriptive feedback. The tasks expand understanding of formative assessment so that teachers can effectively introduce them into their own classroom practices.

While there are a number of ways the materials can be used, we suggest using small, facilitated study groups or teams followed by cross-team faculty discussions. This approach encourages educators to share their findings and reflections regarding good assessment practice. Involving colleagues in these discussions of effective classroom practices is a supportive way to grow as a professional learning community focused on improving student learning.

“For teachers to be successful in constructing new roles, they need opportunities to participate in a professional community that discusses new teacher materials and strategies and that supports the risk-taking and struggle entailed in transforming practice” (Putnam & Borko, 2000).

Cognitive Complexity

A Side-by-Side View of Bloom's Taxonomy and Webb's Depth of Knowledge Taxonomy

Bloom's Taxonomy	Webb's Depth of Knowledge
REMEMBERING The recall of specifics and universals, involving little more than bringing to mind the appropriate material.	Level 1 RECALL Recall of fact, information or procedure
UNDERSTANDING Ability to process knowledge on a low level such that the knowledge can be reproduced or communicated without verbatim repetition.	Level 2 BASIC APPLICATION OF SKILL/ CONCEPT Use of information, conceptual knowledge, procedures, two or more steps, etc.
APPLYING The use of abstractions in concrete situations.	Level 3 STRATEGIC THINKING Requires reasoning, developing a plan or sequence of steps; has some complexity; more than one possible answer. At the classroom level, these tasks generally take up to 10 minutes to complete. This is not a to-the-minute requirement, but rather a guideline.
ANALYSING The breakdown of a situation into its component parts.	
EVALUATING Making value judgments about a method, information, ideas or arguments.	
CREATING Putting together elements and parts to form a whole, and then making value judgments about the method.	Level 4 EXTENDED THINKING Requires investigation; time to think and process multiple conditions of the problem or task. At the classroom level, these non-routine tasks generally take more than 10 minutes to complete. This is not a to-the-minute "requirement", but rather a guideline. A specific time requirement is not a distinguishing factor for LEVEL 4.

In classroom application, it is important to understand both Bloom's Taxonomy and Webb's Depth of Knowledge Taxonomy. In the US, some states use DOK for state assessment, and some use Bloom's. Knowing which is used and under what circumstances is pertinent information, especially at the instructional level. Also, it is important to understand which is being used to frame both instruction *and* assessment in textbooks used in the classroom.