

# ENSURING EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION

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*How do I improve teaching  
using multiple measures?*

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private collaboration platform for schools, districts, and education organizations that lets teachers engage in deep discussions of TeachingChannel videos and upload their own videos for reflection and coaching. It's never been easier to make the transition and begin using video for self-reflection and professional development.

### **Ask Your Students**

Besides watching their own teaching and discussing it with others, teachers can use student surveys to ask their students what they think about the classroom experience. Sarah Brown Wessling, the 2010 National Teacher of the Year and an English language arts teacher at Johnston High School in Johnston, Iowa, describes why she regularly uses student evaluations of her teaching to hone her instruction: "It's hard to do it. It's hard to put yourself out there, [but] I take them very, very seriously. It's really nice to be able to get these but they're also honest, which is exactly what I've asked of them" (Wessling, n.d.).

Wessling has been asking her students to fill out course evaluations at the end of each semester for a long time. Recently, she was inspired to redesign her course evaluations to match the seven characteristics of the Tripod Student Survey developed by Ron Ferguson at Harvard University, a version of which was used in the MET study. The characteristics are care, control, clarify, challenge, captivate, confer, and consolidate. Each of the "seven Cs" is measured using multiple survey items; the associated student perceptions can be seen in Figure 2. The data that result from a targeted

survey such as this can be vital to responsive teachers who are looking to improve their teaching.

**FIGURE 2: The Seven Cs and Students' Perceptions**

Care	My teacher seems to know if something is bothering me.
Control	My classmates behave the way the teacher wants them to.
Clarify	My teacher knows when the class understands.
Challenge	In this class, we learn to correct our mistakes.
Captivate	I like the way we learn in this class.
Confer	My teacher wants us to share our thoughts.
Consolidate	The comments I get help me know how to improve.

Wessling, like other teachers, distributes the course evaluation at the end of the semester, but she also recommends taking “temperature readings” fairly often. Asking students to report—anonously—on what’s going well, what’s not going well, and where they’re progressing is invaluable to improving instruction. Through these surveys, it’s possible to gain insights that might otherwise be difficult, such as when and how to rethink the balance of small- and whole-group discussions in the classroom.

Teachers can learn a lot from student surveys. After all, who doesn’t want to know if their students are sufficiently

challenged, if their explanations are clear or confusing, or if students are comfortable asking them for help? We must remember that students perceive clear differences among their teachers and that those differences are correlated with student learning gains. Because students have an enormous stake in teaching effectiveness, student surveys need to be done carefully. With that in mind, it's best to use a validated survey and not try to construct one yourself. How often a survey is distributed is up to you. You can use it summatively at the end of a semester or school year, or you can use it several times during the year as a type of formative feedback. You can download and use the version of the Tripod Student Survey used in the MET study from [www.metproject.org/resources.php](http://www.metproject.org/resources.php). Examples and templates of other surveys are also available online.

## **Examine Student Work**

Of course, the real proof of effective teaching is student learning. That's why the overwhelming majority of teachers agree that student growth over the course of an academic year is the most important metric in measuring their performance. According to a nationally representative survey of teachers conducted in 2010 and 2012, 85 percent of teachers say that student growth over the course of an academic year should contribute a great deal or a moderate amount to measuring their performance (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012b, p. 32).

Controversy arises when we consider what types of student growth measures make the most sense. Teachers,

understandably, value those measures closest to the classroom—those that provide the most immediate feedback for how to improve, including classroom assignments, formative assessments, and class participation (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012b, p. 26). However, it's important that when such measures are used as part of a formal teacher development and evaluation system, they are comparable, rigorous, and reliable across classrooms and schools. It's understandable that states and districts want measures of student learning in *all* grades and subjects, so that *all* teachers are treated equally, but it's been disheartening to see some districts rush to develop nonvalidated assessments in subjects such as music and gym and then weight them in new teacher evaluation systems.

It's time to hit pause and refocus this debate. Even validated assessments in subjects such as math and literacy don't provide a complete picture of how effective a teacher has been. Measuring growth on state tests by taking into account where students start provides only one valid measure of teaching performance—but it should not account for more than half of a teacher's total evaluation score and could account for as little as one-third.

We think there's a lot of promise in common classroom assignments and student learning objectives. Nevertheless, until we know that they're high-quality, rigorous, and comparable, their best use is to provide teachers with formative and diagnostic feedback about their practice—not to make consequential personnel decisions.