

# Introduction

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*Thomas R. Guskey*

Teachers at all levels of education today are beginning to recognize the value of classroom formative assessments. They are coming to see how the results from well designed assessments *for learning* (Stiggins, 2008) can be used both to enhance the quality of their teaching and to guide improvements in student learning. Instead of treating assessments as only evaluation devices that mark the end of an instructional unit, more and more teachers today realize that formative assessments offer exactly what they have always wanted: a practical and efficient means to make their teaching better and to help all of their students learn better.

Ironically, most teachers believe that using classroom assessments to guide improvements in teaching and learning is a relatively new idea in education. But in truth, the value of “formative” assessments was identified nearly four decades ago by true giants in the field of education. In their 1971 book *Handbook on Formative and Summative Evaluation of Student Learning*, Benjamin Bloom, Thomas Hastings, and George Madaus described the benefits of offering students regular feedback on their learning progress through classroom formative assessments. Bloom went on to outline specific strategies teachers could use to implement formative assessments as part of regular classroom routines, both to improve student learning and to reduce gaps in the achievement of different subgroups of students (Bloom, 1971). It was Bloom who initiated the phrase “formative assessments” and who provided practical guidance for their use in modern classrooms (Guskey, 2006, 2007).

Although it has taken quite a while for the idea to catch on, formative classroom assessments are now used in kindergarten through college and university classes. Many teachers learned about formative assessments through the work of Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998), who verified what Bloom and his colleagues

# Developing Our Assessment Literacy

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*Cassandra Erkens*

The discovery that few educators consider themselves to be “assessment literate” is startlingly consistent. When asked about their preparation in this area, “most teachers say they develop their assessment knowledge and practices on the job” (Topolka Jorissen, 2006, p. 22). And given how powerful we know assessment to be in the learning process, our lack of assessment literacy is consistently startling. How is it that teachers are not provided with the necessary formal instruction and practice to become skilled in designing and using quality assessments to support learning? In our undergraduate education programs, many of us received very little information or skill development regarding the accurate design and effective use of classroom assessments. Armed with little but our personal experiences, we then went into our classrooms, closed the doors, and developed our own assessment practices and beliefs, often re-creating the very limited or misinformed assessment experiences we ourselves navigated as learners.

Today, a strong case can be made that our profession has exchanged the development of our own assessment literacy for a reliance on the expertise of both textbook and testing companies (Popham, 2001; R. Stiggins, personal communication, May 21, 2008). We have trusted those we believe to be more knowledgeable in test-item development and statistical validity and reliability to develop our assessments. And we are right: textbook and testing companies *have* become much more assessment literate as they constantly field-test and improve their own questions and ultimately refine their craft knowledge and skills. However, we have erred in our understanding of the overall strengths, limitations, and even purposes of such assessments. We complain about their shortcomings, yet we easily employ these predesigned assessments in classrooms, and we accept their results as

To add structure to our curriculum review, we developed a checklist (table 3.3) to identify the learning targets defined in our state standards that supported our vision for quality social studies instruction. Each of our team members then worked through our learning targets, evaluating the alignment between individual outcomes, our shared vision, and our understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of our students.

**Table 3.3: Alignment Checklist**

Learning Target: _____	Yes	No
1. Does this learning target directly support our vision for social studies instruction?		
2. Does this learning target cover knowledge that will be new to our students and valuable to their continued study of today's world?		
3. Have our students demonstrated mastery of this learning target without direct instruction in previous years?		
4. Is this learning target addressed in other content areas or grade levels? If so, which ones?		
5. Would you recommend that we include this learning target on our list of essential outcomes for this school year?		

After each team member evaluated and identified the outcomes that were essential to meeting our vision for quality social studies instruction, we generated three lists: targets that received unanimous approval, targets that received unanimous rejection, and targets upon which our team had yet to come to consensus. Our initial review left us with thirty-one learning targets—out of an original ninety—that received support from our entire team and ten that needed further review.

During the course of a regularly scheduled meeting designed to discuss the ten remaining learning targets, we added six additional outcomes to our list of essential learnings, raising our total to thirty-seven. Overall, fifty-three targets defined by our state standards were labeled nonessential, and our curriculum had been narrowed by nearly 60 percent. As classroom teachers, we continued to struggle with the recognition that we were systematically eliminating elements from our required curriculum that could appear on state assessments in the future, but we also understood that each of us had been overlooking—or underteaching—other, more critical elements of the required curriculum. The care that we had put

### ***Matching Knowledge Targets to Assessment Methods***

Knowledge targets are perhaps the easiest to match to an assessment method. Selected-response items, especially in terms of the efficiency and simplicity of overall scoring, can measure student recall of facts, procedures, definitions, and the like most easily. Teachers are familiar with selected-response items since they are found on most, if not all, state tests and in textbook materials, including software test-item banks. Selected-response items make it possible for a teacher to observe at a glance patterns within groups of students. For example, if approximately equal numbers of students chose each answer A, B, C, and D, then it appears that the students who answered incorrectly guessed the answer. This assumes that the items are well constructed and intended to reveal misconceptions and misunderstandings in student reasoning and thinking (Fisher & Frey, 2007). When such results are quickly available, changes to instruction can follow shortly thereafter.

Knowledge targets can also be assessed through constructed-response items. For example, instead of simply labeling a picture of a microscope, students can list the parts and write about what each part is for and how it functions. Students could be asked to describe how to prepare and use a slide, thereby showing an understanding of how the microscope parts work together. Identifying the functions of a microscope is still a knowledge target, but in this instance, more information about student thinking can be culled from a constructed response than from a selected-response format.

Performance assessments are not a good match with knowledge targets. We might be tempted to assume that if a student can do something, he or she must have the knowledge behind it. However, after someone shows me how to drive a car, I can do so without knowing all the parts of the car or all the rules of the road. I might be able to hit a free throw without knowing anything about the game of basketball. Most likely I would not do either of these things well, but being able to perform a task may or may not mean I know what I need to know.

Personal communication, on the other hand, provides a partial match for knowledge targets. The teacher can ask follow-up questions of the student or ask the student to elaborate his or her response. Using personal communication for knowledge targets can be a time-consuming option. If students are responding in learning logs, for example, the teacher must decide if he or she will read all

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____
1. After studying _____, I am confident I can do the following learning target(s) successfully.
2. After studying _____, I can do the following learning target(s), but I still need to work on it.
3. After studying _____, I am still struggling with the following learning target(s).
4. There is one learning target I understand better than the test showed.
a. Learning Target:
b. Proof of My Understanding:
5. There is one learning target I am going to work to improve on over the next week.
a. Learning Target:
b. My Plan:
• Friday—
• Saturday—
• Sunday—
• Monday—
• Tuesday—
• Wednesday—
• Thursday—
• Friday— <i>Mr. Overlie will give me a quiz on this learning target so I can prove my understanding.</i>

Figure 8.4: A self-assessment for reflection on strengths and weaknesses, example 2.