

FAST ^{AND} EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT

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Introduction

The first time I ever assigned work to students as a new teacher, I was ready for them to not have completed their work—and to have all manner of excuses (though the breadth and creativity of these excuses were impressive). What surprised me was how impatient students were to get the work back. Almost from the moment they handed the work to me, students were asking, “What did I get?” and “Have you marked the assignments?” This included the students who handed the work in late and—remarkably—one student who hadn’t handed in the work at all.

When I returned the work a couple of days later (“Finally!” observed one student, who’d given me his work that very morning, two days late), I was eager to see how they would respond to all my feedback, particularly because I’d set aside some personal obligations to get the work back quicker than I originally planned and had meticulously annotated each piece with detailed advice.

The students were largely indifferent to my efforts. They quickly checked their grades, and only some gave the comments a cursory glance before putting the work back in their folders. A little perturbed, I debriefed with my colleagues in the staff room: Did it always take so long to mark the work? Was it always so hard to get students to take your advice? (“Welcome to teaching!” one dryly observed.) Their advice in response was both helpful and honest: I would get better and quicker at it with practice, but the workload related to correcting student work and providing feedback was always demanding.

When you start out as a teacher, the demands of assessment can be utterly overwhelming—it felt to me like trying to drink from a fire hose. However, it is not just those in their first few years of teaching who struggle with the demands associated with feedback and correction. Teachers at all levels of experience wrestle with this issue. “It’s hard to focus on your students’ needs,” one teacher confided to me, “when your view is obscured by piles of marking.”

Providing helpful feedback and creating meaningful assessment tasks while keeping up with reviewing and correcting student work (let alone balancing your work life and your personal life) is one of the biggest challenges of teaching. *Fast and Effective Assessment* offers teachers a systematic way to approach this problem. Each of the six chapters lays out key strategies for improving the quality of feedback your students receive while reducing the time and effort you spend on generating this feedback.

In Chapter 1 we explore how to refine your questioning technique. Teachers question students at every stage of assessment, from quizzing them for prior knowledge before starting a topic to asking them to reflect on their final results, so refining your questioning can have a profound effect on every aspect of learning. Using questioning to quickly check on your students’ progress and offer them some in-the-moment feedback saves you from having to do this via more laborious and time-intensive written assessment. These refinements require only small adjustments of technique and a little additional planning and preparation. They are an excellent introduction to how you can improve your assessment and feedback practices without adding to your workload.

Feedback works best when your students have a precise sense of what they are trying to learn. If they know where they are going, then their feedback to you about their progress is more accurate and your advice to them about what they need to do to reach their goals is more relevant. In Chapter 2 we discuss how, more than just telling students where they are headed, we need them to *internalize* these goals. When students

understand what is required of them, they are much more active in giving and responding to feedback and you can target your efforts on what will help them most. This chapter gives you a range of practical strategies for encouraging your students to take ownership of their learning goals.

Once you and your students have established what they are learning, you need strategies for checking on their progress toward this goal. Most of the traditional ways we check on our students' learning involve collecting and correcting large amounts of student work, but I'm interested in ways to avoid unnecessary work for teachers. In Chapter 3 we look at quick techniques for finding out what your students know and what they are struggling with. We want a tighter feedback cycle so students aren't waiting to get a piece of written work back to know what they need to work on next. This chapter details a series of fast formative assessment strategies that you can use to check and correct during class time instead of having to add more to your correction pile.

Summative testing is one of the most common ways that teachers assess student progress. However, waiting until the end of a unit to assess your students' progress is often counterproductive—you don't want to give students feedback only after their learning on the topic is finished. Chapter 4 explores how you can modify traditional testing strategies to provide quick and reliable methods for monitoring your students' ongoing progress. These tests are fast and accurate, and they give you a way to provide formative feedback to your students without requiring extensive or time-consuming marking.

All these strategies improve the quality of your feedback while reducing the *amount* of work you have to correct. However, you also need strategies for reducing the *time* it takes to correct the work that remains. In Chapter 5 we explore ways to mark faster. We investigate techniques for encouraging students to proof their work more closely so you waste less time correcting low-level errors. We discuss methods for automating correction, studying representative samples of student work, and other ways to speed up your marking. This chapter also offers tips on how to couch

your advice so students understand and act on it more readily and you can spend less time repeating yourself.

Students, of course, have a role to play in all this. It is a waste of your valuable time if you are carefully assessing and annotating work but your students are not responding to your advice. How do you get students to act on your feedback? Chapter 6 explores practical strategies for encouraging students to be more actively involved in their own assessment. We investigate minimal-marking strategies and alternative grading schemes and look at how you can use self- and peer marking to reduce your workload while helping students reach a deeper understanding of what you are teaching.

When I coach teachers on reducing the workload associated with assessment, I find that concentrating on one or two of these steps can have a substantial impact. Just having quicker ways to mark work or getting students to play a more active role in the feedback cycle, for example, can make a real difference in the everyday demands of teaching. Employing all of these steps can be transformative.

Teachers need assessment strategies that work not just in theory but in the busy environment of the everyday classroom. This book offers ways to assess when you are swamped by marking student work, dealing with the pressing needs of multiple students, and trying to complete a long list of school and system-level obligations. It explores assessment strategies that are not just effective but sustainable. The success of this approach can be attributed to this focus on finding techniques that work as part of an everyday teaching routine—or as one teacher I coached neatly put it: “I think this worked for me because it didn’t change my mind about assessment—it changed my habits.”

I hope it works for you, too.

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More Effective Questioning

Teachers who want to reduce the amount of time they spend correcting and grading student work often ask me, “Where do I start?” Intuitively, most teachers want to begin by looking at their marking practices. But a lot of the work associated with correction is actually generated long before students put pen to paper. The way you set up and run a learning activity can have a profound effect on how much correction you have to do at the end of it.

Instead of turning to grading practices, I usually start with questioning technique. Questioning is the basic building block of assessment. Teachers ask, on average, 200 to 300 questions a day (Brualdi, 1998). They use questioning to gauge prior learning, to check for understanding, to elicit evidence, to monitor individual performance, and to encourage whole-class groups to share their insights and learn from one another. Refining your questioning technique, then, can help you improve all levels of your practice.

What does this look like in a classroom? Compare the following exchanges:

Exchange 1

Teacher: Li, is 19 a prime number?

Li: Yes.

Teacher: Tom, what about 119?

Tom: No.

Exchange 2

Teacher: Li, 19 is a prime number. Why?

Li: Because it is only divisible by itself and 1.

Teacher: Can someone rephrase that? Tom?

Tom: It has no other factors—other than 1 and itself.

Essentially, these exchanges explore exactly the same thing. However, in the second exchange the teacher elicits a more sophisticated response simply by asking the student to justify his answer (“Why?”). Similarly, “bouncing” the question to a second student (“Tom?”) is another way to elicit a more thoughtful answer.

When I coach teachers, I like to show them how being more *deliberate* about their questioning can generate better student responses. Questioning is a subtle and, for many, intuitive practice. Many teachers I work with have never been trained in specific questioning techniques. They are unaware of what really effective questioning sounds like. Others I encounter use these techniques so frequently that questioning is an innate part of their practice. These teachers often find it difficult to articulate precisely what these techniques are and how they are using them. Being *deliberate* about questioning means you can name each specific technique. It means that you can use them in a targeted way. And it means that you have the vocabulary to discuss with your colleagues how to best use these strategies.

The key advantage of this approach is that it doesn’t require teachers to use up more of their limited class time or undertake further preparation. Making a few subtle adjustments in how you query your students takes little additional planning time but can substantially change how

your students respond, revealing to you more about what they know and ultimately saving you time over the long term.

Questioning for Fuller Participation

A teacher once told me that she felt like a ventriloquist when she ran class discussions: “I answer so many of my own questions I feel like I’m having a conversation with myself!” Another characterized his class discussions as “sort of a play,” which he and “a handful of students put on while the rest of the class watch like an audience.” As teachers, we are familiar with what has generated these responses: the challenge of running an inclusive class discussion. The aim is simple: we want to create a classroom where *all* students take an active part in the learning and we don’t have to do all the talking ourselves.

This is not as easy as it sounds. Indeed, a small number of students volunteer the majority of answers teachers get to hear (William & Leahy, 2015). In fact, some studies have found that only around 25 percent of students regularly answer questions in class (Black & William, 2014). Students who don’t take part in this aspect of your lessons are missing out; question-and-answer sessions are an opportunity for them to demonstrate the extent of their knowledge, try their ideas out loud, and learn from classmates.

Obviously, we don’t want our students to become spectators in their own learning. What strategies can you use to include more students in class discussion? “Cold calling” and “thinking time” are among the most effective.

Cold Calling

Teachers cold-call students when they ask them a question without first checking whether they know the answer. For example, instead of asking the whole class, “Who can tell me what a zone defense is?” you might cold-call a specific student: “What is a zone defense? Piers?”

Many teachers I have coached are uneasy about cold calling in class discussions. They worry that it puts students “on the spot” and can embarrass them or make them feel anxious. (This concern is heightened if they are working with students who have learning disabilities or are not confident using the target language.) Teachers are also concerned about students “switching off” if they are targeting their attention to an individual student.

These are legitimate concerns but not reasons to avoid this technique. With a few subtle adjustments, you can avoid these outcomes. Take, for instance, the example just provided. If you place the student’s name at the start of the question, then other students do tend to fall into the role of spectator, watching to see how that student answers *his* question. By contrast, pausing and then adding the name at the end of the question (“Piers?”) gets a very different response. Asking the question this way means that the whole class is more likely to do the mental work of thinking of an answer—the question, after all, might be coming to them. Here are some other techniques and approaches that help you get the most out of cold calling.

Telling students. Cold calling is most effective when students are aware that you are going to use this style of questioning and understand why you are using it. Make it clear that you ask questions not to find out who can get it right but to discover what each of them is thinking. Explain that cold calling encourages everyone to be involved in class discussion. Make sure that they know that you are well aware of their abilities and that you won’t unfairly put them on the spot. Such an explanation could sound something like this:

OK, guys. We’re going to have a class discussion to explore what you think the answers might be. I’m going to include everybody by cold calling. I just want to hear what you are thinking, so don’t worry if you don’t know the answer. Guessing and making mistakes is how we develop our understanding. Remember our motto: Being wrong is not the opposite of right; it is the *pathway* to being right.

Speculative framing. I have found that students are more likely to respond to cold-call questions if they feel they can speculate about *possible* responses rather than come up with the correct answer. Using cue words such as *might* and *could* signals to students that it is OK to speculate:

Traditional question: Carlos, what is the answer?

Reframed question: What *might* be the answer? Carlos?

This is a minor adjustment, but for a student concerned about making mistakes in public, the reframed question involves much less social risk. Consider the following exchange:

Teacher: What is the answer?

Student: I don't know.

Teacher: If you did know, what might be the answer?

Student: Twenty-three.

Teacher: That's right.

In this exchange, the student didn't think of the answer between the first and second question, but it became safer to speculate. This kind of framing, popularized by Dylan Wiliam, legitimizes conjecture and encourages your students to voice their tentative first thoughts as their understanding develops. This type of questioning is a powerful tool in mixed-ability classes and one of the first things I show teachers who want ways to differentiate their questioning for students who are struggling.

Answer scaffolds. Using answer scaffolds is another way to make it easier for your students to respond to cold-call questions. An answer scaffold is a list of phrases that maps out the typical sentence structure of an answer. I usually give it to students as a worksheet or write it on the board so it can be used as a reference during the discussion. This approach reduces the "language demands of the task," allowing students to focus on the content of the answer (Fisher & Frey, 2014, p. 23). If, for example, you wanted your class to answer the question "How have you revised your understanding of this novel?" you could give students a worksheet with these sentence stems (Olson, 2011) to help them formulate a response:

I used to think _____, but now I think _____.
One way I've changed my mind is _____.
My latest thought on that is _____.

Students are more likely to respond to all types of questions if the form of the answer is familiar to them (Fisher & Frey, 2014), but I have found this approach works particularly well with cold-call questions. If you have a high number of English language learners (ELLs) in your class, then this approach is one that should be part of your repertoire.

Think-Pair-Share. There are many thinking routines that you can use to give your students a structured way to gather their thoughts before initiating a classroom discussion with cold calling. Think-Pair-Share (Barkly, Major, & Cross, 2014) is the best known of these routines. The process has three simple stages:

- Think:* Give your students some time to silently consider a question or stimulus material.
- Pair:* Ask them to share their thoughts with a partner, identifying the most compelling of their initial responses.
- Share:* Finally, get the students to share their insights with the whole class group.

In the Think-Pair-Square-Share variation (Millis & Cottell, 1997), you add one more step: ask each pair to match up with another pair (making a “square” group of four) before sharing. Whichever variation you use, thinking routines like this one ensure your students have been given an extended time to formulate an answer before they might be called on.

Question relay. Teachers who are trying out cold calling often ask me what to do when a student responds with an automatic “I don’t know.” There is nothing wrong with a student (or a teacher, for that matter) saying “I don’t know,” but if it is a student’s unthinking first reaction or a strategy used to avoid reflection, then the teacher must deal with it.

I usually recommend trying a question relay: respond to the student by telling her that you will ask two other students for their thoughts and then come back to her to see which of those answers could have been