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CHAPTER 1

Assessment: It Doesn't Have to Be the Enemy

We use the general term *assessment* to refer to all those activities undertaken by teachers – and by their students in assessing themselves – that provide information to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities. Such assessment becomes formative assessment when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching to meet student needs.

— Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998)

Never, in a million years, did I think I would write a book on assessment. But when the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation hit its stride in the United States, the political tenor got to be too much for me. Its penchant for the business adage, “You manage what you measure”, had gone overboard. Instead of NCLB improving teaching and learning, it had morphed into a way to judge and rank kids and teachers.

Thankfully, my primary roots reminded me why assessment was important in the first place. I realised that assessment wasn’t the enemy; it was the way it was being used to judge and punish instead of inform and help educators get smarter about teaching and learning.
I began to examine my definition of assessment and embrace it in a way that would not only inform my instruction but also provide useful feedback to students. I knew there needed to be multiple pieces of evidence to tell me the stories of the learners in my room so that neither they nor I would ever be judged solely by a test score.

I dug into the reams of research on formative assessment and became intrigued with the thinking of Dylan Wiliam, Paul Black, Grant Wiggins, Jay McTighe, Lorna Earl, Robert Marzano, Susan Brookhart, Ken O’Connor, Mike Schmoker, Rick Wormelli and Rick Stiggins. I took some risks of my own and realised the possibilities of positive uses of assessment for my students. This book invites readers back into my classroom. But beware: you will not find tips, tricks or an appendix of formative assessments. My hope is that teachers will recognise that many of the tools they already use, when given a slight tweak, can serve as powerful assessments that will inform instruction and improve achievement. Join me as we try to figure out, “So, what do they really know?”

Bombing a Test Doesn’t Mean You’re Stupid

I’ve never liked the word test. When I was a student, tests never reflected what I thought I knew. Sometimes I’d get a high percentage correct when in my heart I knew I hadn’t mastered the material. Other times when I was sure I knew the material, my score would be surprisingly low. I wondered how many of my students felt the same way.

After my class of struggling readers has finished the three days of standardised testing, I ask how they did. Several of them chuckle and say, “Probably not very good. I didn’t even try.” I shake my head in frustration and decide to collect a bit of my own data. Instead of picking up where we left off before the testing, I ask students to get out a piece of paper and respond to the following question:

Describe yourself as a test-taker. When are tests hard for you and what do the results say about you as a learner?

As students dive into the writing, I head over to see what Erik has written. He is by far the best reader in the class and very smart and the only reason he’s in a reading support class is that he refuses to take placement tests seriously. Erik is also honest. He writes, “Tests say very little about me because I never really try on them. Teachers should base kids’ classes on other stuff.” I nod and move over to see what Vinnie has written.
The comments continue. It’s clear that the group can tell a lot more about this student from the inner-voice sheet than they could from the multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank vocabulary test that they examined first. I let the group speculate for a few more minutes and then I share that they have just examined the work of the same student. Teachers are shocked. “How could the same student have such different performances?” some ask. It’s a great question.
Chapter 2: Let’s Get Personal

Beginning of the Year “To-Dos”

Create a progress-monitoring folder for each student. Folders will hold summative data, calendars with relevant information, annotated text (one for each quarter) and notes from parents, deans, teachers and counsellors.

**Lela**
- Give him the course-of-study booklet and let him see all the different electives that are available.
- Set a goal of taking one of those electives second semester. This means I will have to have evidence that he can read beyond his standardised test scores. Retesting with the Gates-MacGinite at the end of the first semester using a different form is an option. Student work samples are another source of data that I can use to indicate improvement.
- Based on his previous Gates-MacGinite scores, Lela did well on the first two columns of questions. This might mean he got tired and started to guess. Point this out to Lela and suggest that he will need to improve his stamina so he has endurance to read the entire test.
- Find out what is hard for Lela to read. Is he struggling with decoding and fluency, or is his mind wandering when the reading gets boring or difficult?

**Brittany**
- Brittany is not happy about being in school. Find out why.
- Check out whom she has for English and see if we can work together to help her be successful on the first assignment.
- Find out what Brittany likes to do when she isn’t in school. Locate texts that will align with her outside interests.
- Build a need to know for her. Show her how to search on Amazon.com and point out how she can find books to read that she will like.

**Glory**
- Point out that recognising that sometimes she “gets it” and sometimes she doesn’t, is something that good readers do. Find out what she already knows how to do when she recognises confusion.
- Model for her how to ask a question to isolate confusion.

**Tyler**
- Acknowledge that reading with fluency and accuracy is terrific, but stress that actually remembering and using what you’ve read is most important.
- Assure him that we will do more than phonic and fluency work in class.
- Show him some examples of annotated text. Point out how readers often annotate as a way to hold thinking and keep their minds from wandering.

**Merranda**
- Create urgency by sharing with her any recent test data.
- Let Merranda know that time is ticking and that this class isn’t about relaxing. It’s about becoming a better reader and writer so she will have more access to the world.
- Assure her that the work will be challenging and that I will expect a lot from her. Reassure her that I will be there to support and scaffold her learning when she struggles.

Figure 2.6
What Works

Assessment Point: Effective assessors know that they have to build time into their workweek to get to know and reflect on who their students are as people. They recognise that they should know their students better than an outsider who hands them a synthesised packet of data. Region-delivered data is only a small part of who each student is. It doesn’t determine what kind of learner each student can be.

Assessment Point: Effective assessors use what they learn from the data to improve their practice. They know that learners are more willing to take a risk when they know the teacher cares about them as people. They remember that even a small change in an instructional practice can make a huge difference to students.

Assessment Point: Effective assessors know that the way in which students define how they read determines how hard they work at constructing meaning – no matter what content you teach. If they believe that their role is to decode with fluency and your job is to make them get it, you will have to work a lot harder than they do.

“Are You Up for a Challenge?”

1. I learned this first one from Donald Graves’s book The Energy to Teach (2001). Choose a class that you are struggling with or would like to know better. On a blank sheet of paper, record the name of every student you can remember. Next to each student’s name, jot down something that you know about them as a learner and/or person. Check your class roster. Whom do you know the best? Who intrigues you? Which student did you forget? Consider how knowing something about each student as an individual might help you connect to them in a way that has nothing to do with school. Challenge yourself during the next class period to discover something new about one of your students whom you don’t know as well as you could.

2. When school starts, ask your students what they think their role as a reader is. Do they think they should decode with fluency, or do they know that they need to actively construct meaning? On the last day of school or at the end of the semester, let them re-read what they wrote the first day. Encourage them to tell you how their thinking about their role as a reader has changed. This will provide you with progress monitoring data that might come in handy later.
What Does Kiana Know? What Does She Need?

From Kiana’s annotations (Figure 5.1), I can tell a lot about the way she reads. Kiana has clearly read the article, but she is somewhat confused about what it says. I can tell she has miscued a part in the second section. She has read the line, “I think she'll sit down in prison and learn to be a better criminal”, but apparently is confused.

Kiana has written at the bottom of this section, “She’s learning to be a better criminal?” The question mark leads me to believe that she is wondering why any adult would want a juvenile to learn how to be a better criminal. My guess is that she read the line and as her eyes moved down the page, she continued thinking about her confusion. This happens a lot – to all readers, not just those who struggle. One minute they comprehend and BOOM, the next minute something confusing has entered their brain and their thinking is pulled away from the words on the page. As their eyes continue down the text, their mind is still trying to figure out the part that was confusing.
“I Can’t Get to Every Kid Every Day!”

Neither can I. I feel successful when I can confer with everyone once every two weeks. I have to use the debriefing time of workshop as another way to touch base with and give feedback to the students with whom I haven’t recently conferred. Below is an example of how I use the entire workshop to assess and give feedback.

It is close to the end of the year and students in my reading workshop class are reading self-selected texts. I want them to reflect on my yearlong goal for them: knowing that books can change their lives. I also want to hear what they think about how reading can give them experiences that they otherwise would not have. As one of our final lessons, I model how the book I am currently reading has influenced my thinking.

**Mini-lesson:** Books help us see another person’s perspective. I model how the book I am reading gives me insight into a life I wouldn’t otherwise know about.

I begin the mini-lesson by saying, “I am reading *Gang Leader for a Day* by Sudhir Venkatesh. This book is about a sociology student who infiltrates a Chicago gang in hopes of discovering how the inner circle of gangs works. I am learning why some kids in poverty turn to gangs.” I put a few paragraphs from a key chapter under the document camera and read them aloud, pausing to annotate and share my thinking. I add, “This book is changing me as a reader because I am getting to see gang life through the eyes of a sociologist who faces some really intense challenges. I need to keep reading because I want to find out if there is a way for people to escape this pattern of violence.” I instruct students that their job today is to think about the way their book is changing them.

**Work time:** While the students read, I move around the room looking for someone to confer with. I will ask them to share with me how they are using the mini-lesson as a purpose for today’s reading. I don’t get to everyone, so when the work time is drawing to a close, I ask students to grab a sticky note and jot down how the book has given them insight into something new.

**Debriefing:** A few students have a chance to share what they wrote before the bell rings. I close class by saying, “I can’t wait to see what the rest of you wrote. I’ll use what you figured out today to see how we can go even deeper into our texts tomorrow.”