Without question, assessment remains among the very hottest topics in school improvement. High-stakes state accountability assessments and adequate yearly progress continue to represent the driving forces of school improvement these days. But, as accountability systems evolve, attention to this topic has turned in an interesting direction. Educators have concluded that testing once a year does not provide sufficient evidence to inform many crucial, more frequently made instructional decisions, which has generated renewed interest in formative assessment.

Traditionally, the term has referred to assessments used to support learning. But, in the current environment, formative assessment as defined by the test publishers has taken on a narrow meaning. In this context, it refers to a system of more frequent summative assessments administered at regular intervals (often quarterly) to determine which students have not yet met state standards — an early warning system, if you will.

We both applaud and, at the same time, challenge this thinking. On the
one hand, it helps us identify students who need help when we still have time to help them. On the other hand, while this very expensive assessment process helps us identify the problem, it doesn't help those students find greater success. For that, we must expand our definition. Enter **assessment for learning**.

Assessment for learning happens in the classroom and involves students in every aspect of their own assessment to build their confidence and maximize their achievement. It rests on the understanding that students, not just adults, are data-driven instructional decision makers. Several key features differentiate assessment for learning from formative assessment as currently being sold by test publishers: To begin with, state standards are deconstructed into classroom-level learning targets, which we translate into language our students understand so they know what they are responsible for learning. In addition, we turn those classroom-level targets into dependably accurate classroom assessments, aspects of which we integrate into daily instruction. In short, everyone understands the definition of success from the outset and we generate an ongoing flow of descriptive feedback that permits students to watch themselves grow. In this case, students and their teachers become partners in the classroom assessment process, relying on student-involved assessment, record keeping, and communication to help students understand what success looks like, see where they are now, and learn to close the gap between the two.

The good news is that research has shown for years that consistently applying principles of assessment for learning has yielded remarkable, if not unprecedented, gains in student achievement, especially for low achievers (Black & William, 1998). Results verify positive impacts across grade levels and school subjects.

However, the troubling news is that we weren't given the opportunity to learn to apply principles of assessment for learning during our preparation to teach. It remains the case that colleges of education often fail to include this kind of assessment training in their programs. And lest we believe that teachers can turn to their principals for assistance in this regard, be advised that assessment training of any sort remains virtually nonexistent in leadership training programs across the nation.

We know what teachers need to know and understand to apply principles of assessment for learning effectively in their classrooms. We know what will happen to their students' confidence, motivation, and achievement if they learn those lessons. We know how to deliver these tools to their hands in an efficient and effective manner.

Research has shown that consistently applying principles of assessment for learning has yielded remarkable, if not unprecedented, gains in student achievement.

**Competence in assessment for learning**

The chart on p. 12 details five keys to classroom assessment quality, with each broken down into specific competencies teachers need to master.

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## Sound classroom assessment practice

### 1. Clear purposes
Assessment processes and results serve clear and appropriate purposes.

- a. Teachers understand who uses classroom assessment information and know their information needs.
- b. Teachers understand the relationship between assessment and student motivation and craft assessment experiences to maximize motivation.
- c. Teachers use classroom assessment processes and results formatively (assessment for learning).
- d. Teachers use classroom assessment results summatively (assessment of learning) to inform someone beyond the classroom about students' achievement at a particular point in time.
- e. Teachers have a comprehensive plan over time for integrating assessment for and of learning in the classroom.

### 2. Clear targets
Assessments reflect clear and valued student learning targets.

- a. Teachers have clear learning targets for students; they know how to turn broad statements of content standards into classroom-level learning targets.
- b. Teachers understand the various types of learning targets they hold for students.
- c. Teachers select learning targets focused on the most important things students need to know and be able to do.
- d. Teachers have a comprehensive plan over time for assessing learning targets.

### 3. Sound design
Learning targets are translated into assessments that yield accurate results.

- a. Teachers understand the various assessment methods.
- b. Teachers choose assessment methods that match intended learning targets.
- c. Teachers design assessments that serve intended purposes.
- d. Teachers sample learning appropriately in their assessments.
- e. Teachers write assessment questions of all types well.
- f. Teachers avoid sources of mismeasurement that bias results.

### 4. Effective communication
Assessment results are managed well and communicated effectively.

- a. Teachers record assessment information accurately, keep it confidential, and appropriately combine and summarize it for reporting (including grades). Such summary accurately reflects current level of student learning.
- b. Teachers select the best reporting option (grades, narratives, portfolios, conferences) for each context (learning targets and users).
- c. Teachers interpret and use standardized test results correctly.
- d. Teachers effectively communicate assessment results to students.
- e. Teachers effectively communicate assessment results to a variety of audiences outside the classroom, including parents, colleagues, and other stakeholders.

### 5. Student involvement
Students are involved in their own assessment.

- a. Teachers make learning targets clear to students.
- b. Teachers involve students in assessing, tracking, and setting goals for their own learning.
- c. Teachers involve students in communicating about their own learning.

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...to tap the full potential of assessment for learning (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2004).

First, we need to know why we're assessing. If assessment is the process of gathering evidence to inform instructional decisions, teachers must begin the assessment process by asking:

- What decisions?
- Who's making the decisions?

- What kind of information will be helpful?

The assessment must produce that information, and it must take into account the needs of the student as a crucial decision maker.

Second, quality assessments can arise only from a clear vision of the achievement to be mastered. We cannot dependably assess targets we have not completely defined and mastered ourselves. Neither can we communicate them clearly to students.

Third, we develop and use assessments in a manner that yields accurate results. We select proper assessment methods, high-quality items and scoring guides, and plan for careful sampling of achievement. And we minimize distortion in results due to bias.

Fourth, results must feed into...
effective communication systems that
deliver accurate information into the
hands of the intended user(s) in a
timely and understandable manner.
For students, this includes receiving
descriptive feedback while there is still
time to use it to improve.

And finally, students must be
taught the skills they need to be in
control of their own ultimate academic
success: self-assessment and goal
setting, reflection, keeping track of
and sharing their learning.

**Becoming competent**
in assessment for learning — what
won't work and why

No Child Left Behind has lit an
assessment fire in our nation: All
things assessment-related sell fast. But
we can't buy assessments that will
circumvent teachers' need for deeper
assessment expertise. Off-the-shelf
assessments may be marketed as
"formative assessments," but they
don't help teachers understand or
apply the strategies that have been
proven to increase student learning.
They do not show teachers how to
make learning targets clear to stu-
dents, or how to help students differ-
etiate between strong and weak
work. They do not help teachers
understand what kinds of feedback
are most effective or how to find the
time to provide that feedback. They
do not help teachers show students
how to assess their own strengths and
weaknesses, nor do they emphasize
the motivational power of having stu-
dents track and share their learning.
They cannot substitute for the profes-
sional development needed to cause
changes in assessment practice in the
classroom.

Neither can we "workshop" our
way to assessment competence. A pro-
fessional development model designed
to provide a quick workshop fix or to
economize on time at the expense of
deep understanding will fail.
Developing assessment expertise goes
beyond teaching people how to create
a test. It goes beyond showing how to
convert rubric scores to grades or how
to develop a standards-based report
card. It examines well-established
assessment practices that are harmful
to students and their learning, like
factorizing practice work (such as
homework) in the final grade, giving
tests without first understanding what

specific learning each item addresses,
and keeping students in the dark
about the learning for which they are
responsible.

If teachers assign lower grades to
late work, give zeros for cheating, or
factor attendance into grades, a work-
shop on grading is unlikely to change
such unsound practice. It takes an
ongoing investment of cognitive effort
for teachers to think and come to
embrace arguments for not doing
these things, to discuss reasons for want-
ing to continue those grading practices, and
to work out acceptable substitutes that
both hold students accountable for devel-
oping good work habits and communi-
cate effectively about those work
habits.

Changing habits is not easy. It
takes work in and out of class to build
assessment for learning environments
that meet the student's information
needs along with the teacher's.
Increasing descriptive feedback while
reducing evaluative feedback means

**Students must be taught**
the skills they need to be
in control of their own
ultimate academic success:
self-assessment and goal
setting, reflection, keeping
track of and sharing their
learning.
that the teacher must figure out ways to comment on the quality of student work and then schedule time for students to act on that feedback before being graded. Teaching students to assess their own work takes class time as well as practice. It is difficult to delete content coverage in order to accommodate these activities on a regular basis—there is already more to teach than there is time.

Developing assessment competencies requires that people rethink both what they do now and what beliefs led them to adopt those practices. It requires that they make decisions about what to give up and what to retool. The workshop model of professional development cannot offer the support needed for such changes.

What will work? Learning teams

In the learning team approach to professional development, participants engage in a combination of independent study and ongoing small-group collaboration with a commitment to helping all group members develop classroom assessment expertise. The process begins with an infusion of new ideas that can come from several sources: attending workshops, reading books and articles, watching videos, and observing other teachers at work. It continues with ongoing opportunities to discuss and work through the cognitive consonance and dissonance that arise when practice and beliefs conflict. But most importantly, it requires that each team member transform new assessment ideas into actual classroom practices with which they experiment. In this way, they and their students learn valuable lessons about what works for them and why.

When the experiences of such hands-on learning are shared among teammates in regular team meetings, all members benefit from the lessons of each partner. When teams commit to shaping the ideas into new classroom practice, reflecting on the results, and sharing the benefits with each other, professional growth skyrockets. Teams reach their ultimate goal of changing classroom assessment practices in specific ways that benefit students.

Resources in assessment for learning

Research on assessment’s impact on student achievement:


Valuable professional development materials:


few teachers currently use the words “assessment” and “joy” in the same sentence.

of each partner. When teams commit to shaping the ideas into new classroom practice, reflecting on the results, and sharing the benefits with each other, professional growth skyrockets. Teams reach their ultimate goal of changing classroom assessment practices in specific ways that benefit students.

This is challenging work and can be even painful at times; few teachers currently use the words “assessment” and “joy” in the same sentence. Yet if we don’t begin this dialogue, this study of assessment for learning, we are relegating assessment to its accountability role and passing up its potential benefits to students. Let us fundamentally rethink how assessment is used in our classrooms, eliminate its negative effects on students, and act collaboratively to ensure that our classroom assessment practices maximize, not just measure, our students’ achievement.

REFERENCES


CHAPTER

2

Assessment for and of Learning

Self-assessment by pupils, far from being a luxury, is in fact an essential component of formative assessment. (Black & William, 1998)

Many people want to use assessment information, and they want to use it in many ways. Some wish to help students learn more, as when Ms. Weathersby uses writing rubrics in her English classes. Others wish to track student progress toward important learning outcomes, to decide where to allocate resources, to check which adoptions are most effective, to provide accountability information to the public, or to refer students for special services.

We can think of all assessment uses as falling into one of two general categories—assessments FOR learning and assessments OF learning. Both categories have their place in education and in the classroom—you’ve been doing both for years. What is perhaps new is an expanded understanding of the roles each should play to maximize student achievement while minimizing unintended negative consequences and side effects for students.

The goal of this chapter is to elaborate the differences and similarities between assessment for and of learning, relate them to student motivation and learning, and provide an organizing framework for assessment for learning in the classroom. In our discussion, we will concentrate on the shaded portions of Figure 2.1.
Keys to Quality Classroom Assessment

**Key 1: Clear Purpose**
What's the purpose?
Who will use the results?
What will they use the results to do?

**Key 2: Clear Targets**
What are the learning targets?
Are they clear?
Are they appropriate?

**Key 3: Sound Design**
What method?
Quality questions?
Sampled how?
Avoid bias how?

**Key 4: Effective Communication**
How manage information?
How report? To whom?

**Key 5: Student Involvement**
Students are users, too.
Students need to understand targets, too.
Students can assess, too.
Students can track progress and communicate, too.

*Effectively Used*
Chapter 2  Assessment for and of Learning

What We Mean by Assessment for and of Learning

Table 2.2 shows our summary of the key differences between assessment for and of learning. Assessments of learning are those assessments that happen after learning is supposed to have occurred to determine if it did. They are used to make statements of student learning status at a point in time to those outside the classroom, as when making student referrals or making decisions about programs. State assessments, local standardized tests, and college admissions tests represent external examinations that do this. But we also conduct assessments of learning within the classroom when we gather evidence to determine a student’s report card grade. Unit final exams and important projects often serve this purpose.

Assessments for learning happen while learning is still underway. These are the assessments that we conduct throughout teaching and learning to diagnose student needs, plan our next steps in instruction, provide students with feedback they can use to improve the quality of their work, and help students see and feel in control of their journey to success. Each one reveals to students increments of achievement and how to do better the next time. On these occasions, the grading function is laid aside. This is not about accountability—those are assessments of learning. This is about getting better.

DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

Activity 2.1 Introduction to Assessment for Learning

Please watch the video clip on the accompanying DVD entitled “Assessment OF/ FOR Learning: A Hopeful Vision of the Future.” This clip shows Rick explaining the important distinctions between assessment for and of learning. While you are listening, please complete the form in Table 2.1 to track the differences. A printable version of Table 2.1 appears on the CD.
Table 2.2 Comparing Assessment for and of Learning: Overview of Key Differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for Assessing</th>
<th>Assessment for Learning</th>
<th>Assessment of Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promote increases in achievement to help students meet more standards; support ongoing student growth; improvement</td>
<td>Document individual or group achievement or mastery of standards; measure achievement status at a point in time for purposes of reporting; accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>Students about themselves</td>
<td>Others about students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus of Assessment</td>
<td>Specific achievement targets selected by teachers that enable students to build toward standards</td>
<td>Achievement standards for which schools, teachers, and students are held accountable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place in Time</td>
<td>A process during learning</td>
<td>An event after learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Users</td>
<td>Students, teachers, parents</td>
<td>Policy makers, program planners, supervisors, teachers, students, parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical Uses</td>
<td>Provide students with insight to improve achievement; help teachers diagnose and respond to student needs; help parents see progress over time; help parents support learning</td>
<td>Certify student competence; sort students according to achievement; promotion and graduation decisions; grading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher's Role</td>
<td>Transform standards into classroom targets; inform students of targets; build assessments; adjust instruction based on results; offer descriptive feedback to students; involve students in assessment</td>
<td>Administer the test carefully to ensure accuracy and comparability of results; use results to help students meet standards; interpret results for parents; build assessments for report card grading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student's Role</td>
<td>Self-assess and keep track of progress; contribute to setting goals; act on classroom assessment results to be able to do better next time</td>
<td>Study to meet standards; take the test; strive for the highest possible score; avoid failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Motivator</td>
<td>Belief that success in learning is achievable</td>
<td>Threat of punishment, promise of rewards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>Using rubrics with students; student self-assessment; descriptive feedback to students</td>
<td>Achievement tests; final exams; placement tests; short cycle assessments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2.3 Purposes for (Users and Uses of) Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment User</th>
<th>Assessment for Learning</th>
<th>Assessment of Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Students**    | Am I improving over time?  
                  | Do I know what it means to succeed?  
                  | What should I do next?  
                  | What help do I need?  
                  | Am I succeeding at the level that I should be?  
                  | Am I capable of success?  
                  | How am I doing in relationship to my classmates?  
                  | Is the learning worth the effort? |
| **Teachers**    | What does this student need?  
                  | What do these students need?  
                  | What are student strengths to build on?  
                  | How should I group my students?  
                  | Am I going too fast? Too slow? Too far? Not far enough?  
                  | What grade do I put on the report card?  
                  | What students need to be referred for special service?  
                  | What will I tell parents? |
| **Parents**     | What can we do at home to support learning?  
                  | Is my child learning new things?  
                  | Is my child keeping up?  
                  | Is this teacher doing a good job?  
                  | Is this a good school? District? |
| **Principal**   | Is instruction producing results?  
                  | Are our students ready for the workplace or the next step in learning?  
                  | How shall we allocate building resources to achieve success? |
| **Superintendent** | Are our programs of instruction producing desired results?  
                  | Is each building producing results?  
                  | Which schools need additional resources?  
                  | How shall we allocate district resources to achieve success? |
and student-involvement aspect of assessment for learning that results in the remarkable achievement gains we'll describe in the next section.

If you like the terms "formative" and "summative" better, use them. Just remember to add descriptive feedback to students and student involvement in assessment to the formative side. For simplicity's sake, we'll occasionally use the words "formative" and "summative." When we do, we mean "formative" in its broadest sense.

Why the Distinction Is Important

And now the kicker: As it turns out, the distinction between assessment for and of learning is pivotal to understanding the most effective uses of assessment in the classroom.

Impact of Assessment for Learning

Research evidence gathered around the world shows what happens to student achievement when the principles of assessment for learning permeate the classroom environment. Dozens of studies conducted at all levels of instruction offer evidence of strong achievement gains in student performance as measured by standardized tests (Bloom, 1984; Black & William, 1998; Black, 2003; Meisels, Atkins-Burnett, Xue, Bickel, & Hon, 2003; Rodriguez, 2004). The effect of assessment for learning on student achievement is some four to five times greater than the effect of reduced class size (Ehrenberg, Brewer, Gamoran, & Willms, 2001). Few interventions in education come close to having the same level of impact as assessment for learning.

But the most intriguing result is that, while all students show achievement gains, the largest gains accrue to the lowest achievers. Everyone wins, with those who have the most to win, winning the most.

We're used to thinking about assessment as the measure of impact of instructional interventions; we implement a new program or teaching strategy and then use assessment to see how effective it was. In the case of assessment for learning, assessment becomes not only the measure of impact, but also the innovation that causes change in student achievement; assessment is not just the index of change, it is the change.
Seven Strategies of Assessment for Learning

Where am I going?

1. Provide students with a clear and understandable vision of the learning target.
2. Use examples and models of strong and weak work.

Where am I now?

3. Offer regular descriptive feedback.
4. Teach students to self-assess and set goals.

How can I close the gap?

5. Design lessons to focus on one learning target or aspect of quality at a time.
6. Teach students focused revision.
7. Engage students in self-reflection, and let them keep track of and share their learning.