



ASSESSMENTS FOR LEARNING: TESTS AS A TEACHING TOOL

By Richard Frye

In the last fifteen years a trend has gained prominence throughout education--assessment. "Assessment for student learning" is an information feedback process to guide individual students, faculty members, and schools in improving their effectiveness. Assessment instruments are designed to answer a wide range of self-evaluative questions related to one larger question: how well are students learning?

"Assessment is not an end in itself but a vehicle for educational improvement." Frequent measurement of an array of student outcomes provides feedback about how well we are accomplishing our goals. Assessment aims at the continuing improvement of student development.

However, the collection of assessment information is only the first step in the process. To be useful, it must be analyzed and reflected upon by decision makers, and then used to design and apply changes. Sharpening the focus of education onto student learning outcomes goes beyond mere tinkering with traditional structures and methods; it really constitutes a paradigm shift in philosophy and practice.

More frequent use of assessment gives prompt, valuable feedback. Knowing what you know and don't know focuses your learning. In classes, students need frequent opportunities to perform and receive feedback on their performance. At various points students need chances to reflect on what they have learned and what they still need to know. Every time a student takes a test, he/she is mentally reviewing what has been learned, is processing what has been learned, and is applying what has been learned in new situations or applications. *Test-taking is not separate from instruction. It IS instruction.*

Good teaching communicates high expectations. Expect more and you will get it. High expectations are important for everyone--for the poorly prepared, for those unwilling to exert themselves, and for the bright and well motivated. Expecting students to perform well becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The research is clear and unarguable; "raising the bar" by providing rich and frequent feedback on student performance has been a proven instructional method to insure academic success and long-term learning.

How students are assessed powerfully affects how they study and learn. Managing the frequency and consequences of such assessments, by using daily checks, weekly quizzes, homework and practice assignments, for instance, creates multiple opportunities for students to try out skills, to examine small failures, and to receive advice about how to correct them.

Learning is enhanced by engaging the natural learning functions of the brain, which involves multiple opportunities to process new information. Students form their own meanings from their interactive experiences with new information, in ways that are personally unique. Assessment procedures which provide frequent feedback are important opportunities to process new information.

THE ASSESSMENT LEARNING CYCLE

Assessment is a fundamental and integral part of any curriculum based on student learning. It isn't the "end"--it is the "means." It is worth emphasizing that assessment is not just the measurement of learning; it is in itself *an integral part of learning*. Assessment is the first step in a continual learning cycle which includes measurement, feedback, reflection, and change. The purpose of assessment is not merely to gather information; the purpose of assessment is to foster improvement. Frequent assessment of students helps them to refine concepts and deepen their understanding; it also conveys high expectations, which further stimulates learning.

Over several years beginning in 1988, a group of distinguished classroom teachers met regularly to share ideas and experiences in order to formulate principles for assessment. Their "**Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning**" clarifies the linkages between assessment and student learning:

- 1. The assessment of student learning begins with educational goals.
- 2. Learning entails not only what students know but what they can do; it involves not only knowledge but attitudes, and habits of mind that affect both academic success and performance beyond the classroom.
- 3. Assessment works best when it is ongoing. Improvement is best fostered when assessment is administered over time, monitoring progress toward intended goals in a spirit of continuous improvement.
- 4. Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved. Assessment is a collaborative activity; its aim is wider, better-informed attention to student learning by all parties with a stake in its improvement.
- 5. The point of assessment is not to gather data and return "results"; it is a process that starts with teachers, schools, and districts gathering and interpreting data, then using that data to inform and guide continuous improvement.

CONCLUSION:

A true commitment to student learning is a paradigm shift; it doesn't happen all at once. But a key step is utilizing frequent multiple assessments, both at the classroom, site, and district level to give not merely more data to drive better instruction, but to offer multiple opportunities for students to process new knowledge in different ways.

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