

Clipping from:

Powell & Powell. (2011.) *How to Teach Now*. Va: ASCD. pp. 113-116

FIRST STEPS IN KNOWING OUR ASSESSMENTS

Truly meaningful assessment has two components: quality and variety (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2004). Quality depends on the purpose, validity, and accuracy of the assessment; on how results are communicated; and on the degree of student involvement in the process. Variety in assessment tools provides balance in our evaluation of student learning. Assessment should be a photo album of learning, not merely a snapshot.

In order to ensure that the picture of the learner compiled is as accurate as possible, teachers need to ask some fairly pointed questions about their assessments. The questions that follow, inspired by the work of the Assessment Training Institute (Stiggins et al., 2004), provide a good start.

What Is the Purpose of the Assessment?

Educators generally agree that there are two primary purposes for assessment: (1) to analyze student progress to determine the status of learning, and (2) to serve as an essential component of the learning process in order to promote and enhance further learning. We describe the first function as assessment *of* learning and the second function as assessment *for* learning. Although it is important to understand that these two types of assessment are not mutually exclusive, and there is no need to choose between them, it is useful to distinguish between their purposes and outcomes. Is the assessment *summative*, in that the result will sum up learning achievement and be used to give students a grade? Or is it *formative*, in the sense that the teacher and students will use the results to shape further instruction and learning?

What Are the Targeted Learning Outcomes?

For assessment results to be useful, we must be very sure about what these results mean, and that requires that we have a clear picture of the learning

objectives the assessment is measuring. Learning outcomes usually fall into four general categories: knowledge (including factual recall), critical thinking (including analysis, comparison, evaluation), skills (e.g., writing a paragraph, dribbling a basketball, playing a musical instrument), and the generation of products (Chappuis et al., 2009).

Is the Type of Assessment Appropriate for the Targeted Learning Outcome?

The four types of assessment teachers most frequently use are selected response, extended response, performance tasks, and personal observation and communication. Each is appropriate for assessing some learning outcomes, but less appropriate for others.

Selected-response assessments, which include multiple-choice tests, matching exercises, and true-or-false quizzes, are appropriate measures for the assessment of knowledge—specifically, factual recall. They are less effective when used to evaluate reasoning and very ineffective when used to measure skills or the ability to create a product. A classic example of a mismatch between assessment and outcome occurred back in the 1970s in the United States when the College Board removed the writing sample from the SAT examination and substituted a multiple-choice test that simply asked students to recognize standard written English. Recognizing standard written English (factual knowledge) and generating coherent and well-organized prose (skill, reasoning, product generation) are two very different processes.

Extended written-response assessments, such as traditional essay tests, are appropriate for measuring knowledge and reasoning but ineffective for evaluating skills or the ability to create a product (except, of course, when the product is a piece of writing).

Performance tasks are not effective in assessing knowledge in that they usually have a fairly narrow focus and can rarely cover all the content. They can be effective in determining student reasoning, and they can be highly effective in assessing student skills and ability to create a product. They also appeal to students with a preference for practical intelligence in that they call upon students to engage in authentic problem solving.

Personal observation and communication includes interviewing, questioning, and informal classroom observation conducted by the teacher. This

can be an effective way of assessing students' knowledge and reasoning (especially during think-aloud activities), but it is extremely time-consuming and labor intensive. It is very difficult for a single teacher to observe more than a few students at a given time.

Is the Design of the Assessment Valid?

The question here is whether or not the assessment actually measures the desired learning targets. Is the content covered the content that was taught? Or does the assessment include extraneous factors that could lead to an inaccurate conclusion about what a student understands or can do? For example, on a math test, the direction "explain your answer" leaves unsaid whether the explanation needs to be in mathematical notation, in words, or in pictures, diagrams, or drawings. For some teachers, the word "explain" means "use words," and they might well dock points from a student who does not do so, even if the student's drawing, say, demonstrates clear conceptual understanding of the problem and solution. The pictorial explanation of students who think in pictures may not even be understood by the teacher. In the global classroom, the lack of verbal explanation may also penalize a student who understands the math but is still in the process of learning English.

How Will the Assessment Results Be Communicated?

Generally, teachers give two kinds of feedback: *evaluative feedback* and *descriptive feedback*. Evaluative feedback might be a number score or letter grade (A+, D-) or a few words ("well done" or "outstanding job").

Research has shown that, although there is no correlation between evaluative feedback and enhanced learning (some might argue that there is actually a negative correlation), there is a powerful and necessary correlation between descriptive feedback and ongoing student learning (Sanford, 1995). Descriptive feedback informs students of what they need to do next in order to improve. Comments like "You maintained eye contact with your audience throughout your presentation" and "Your essay had a compelling introduction but lacked a conclusion" help the recipient understand the assessment results and put these results to use.