Educational Leadership

Classroom Assessment for Learning

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Classroom assessment that involves students in the process and focuses on increasing learning can motivate rather than merely measure students.

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Imagine classroom assessment as a healthy part of effective teaching and successful learning. At a time when large-scale, external assessments of learning gain political favor and attention, many teachers are discovering how to engage and motivate students using day-to-day classroom assessment for purposes beyond measurement. By applying the principles of what is called *assessment for learning*, teachers have followed clear research findings of the effects that high-quality, formative assessment can have on student achievement.

We typically think of assessment as an index of school success rather than as the cause of that success. Unfortunately, largely absent from the traditional classroom assessment environment is the use of assessment as a tool to promote greater student achievement (Shepard, 2000). In general, the teacher teaches and then tests. The teacher and class move on, leaving unsuccessful students, those who might not learn at the established pace and within a fixed time frame, to finish low in the rank order. This assessment model is founded on two outdated beliefs: that to increase learning we should increase student anxiety and that comparison with more successful peers will motivate low performers to do better.

By contrast, assessment for learning occurs during the teaching and learning process rather than after it and has as its primary focus the ongoing improvement of learning for all students (Assessment Reform Group, 1999; Crooks, 2001; Shepard, 2000). Teachers who assess for learning use day-to-day classroom assessment activities to involve students directly and deeply in their own learning, increasing their confidence and motivation to learn by emphasizing progress and achievement rather than failure and defeat (Stiggins, 1999; 2001). In the assessment for learning model, assessment is an instructional tool that promotes learning rather than an event designed solely for the purpose of evaluation and assigning grades. And when students become involved in the assessment process, assessment for learning begins to look more like teaching and less like testing (Davies, 2000).

Student-Involved Assessment

Research shows that classroom assessments that provide accurate, descriptive feedback to students and involve them in the assessment process can improve learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998). As a result, assessment for learning means more than just assessing students often, more than providing the teacher with assessment results to revise instruction. In assessment for learning, both teacher and student use classroom assessment information to modify teaching and learning activities. Teachers use assessment information formatively when they

- Pretest before a unit of study and adjust instruction for individuals or the entire group.

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- Analyze which students need more practice.

- Continually revise instruction on the basis of results.

- Reflect on the effectiveness of their own teaching practices.

- Confer with students regarding their strengths and the areas that need improvement.

- Facilitate peer tutoring, matching students who demonstrate understanding with those who do not.

We tend to think of students as passive participants in assessment rather than engaged users of the information that assessment can produce. What we should be asking is, How can students use assessment to take responsibility for and improve their own learning?

Student involvement in assessment doesn't mean that students control decisions regarding what will or won't be learned or tested. It doesn't mean that they assign their own grades. Instead, student involvement means that students learn to use assessment information to manage their own learning so that they understand how they learn best, know exactly where they are in relation to the defined learning targets, and plan and take the next steps in their learning.

Students engage in the assessment for learning process when they use assessment information to set goals, make learning decisions related to their own improvement, develop an understanding of what quality work looks like, self-assess, and communicate their status and progress toward established learning goals. Students involved in their own assessment might

- Determine the attributes of good performance. Students look at teacher-supplied anonymous samples of strong student performances and list the qualities that make them strong, learning the language of quality and the concepts behind strong performance.

- Use scoring guides to evaluate real work samples. Students can start with just one criterion in the guide and expand to others as they become more proficient in scoring. As students engage in determining the characteristics of quality work and scoring actual work samples, they become better able to evaluate their own work. Using the language of the scoring guide, they can identify their areas of strength and set goals for improvement—in essence, planning the next steps in their learning.

- Revise anonymous work samples. Students go beyond evaluating work to using criteria to improve the quality of a work sample. They can develop a revision plan that outlines improvements, or write a letter to the creator of the original work offering advice on how to improve the sample. This activity also helps students know what to do before they revise their own work.

- Create practice tests or test items based on their understanding of the learning targets and the essential concepts in the class material. Students can work in pairs to identify what they think should be on the test and to generate sample test items and responses.

- Communicate with others about their growth and determine when they are nearing success. Students achieve a deeper understanding of themselves and the material that they are attempting to learn when they describe the quality of their own work. Letters to parents, written self-reflections, and conferences with teachers and parents in which students outline the process they used to create a product allow students to share what they know and describe their progress toward the learning target. By accumulating evidence of their own improvement in growth portfolios, students can refer to specific stages in their growth and celebrate their achievement with others.

Effective Teacher Feedback

"You need to study harder." "Your handwriting is very nice." "Good job." Traditionally, teachers use such statements to register their approval or disapproval of student performance. But such evaluative feedback, long a classroom staple, is of limited value for improving student learning and can actually have negative effects on students' desire to learn. And grades, those traditional coded symbols and markings—B-, 71 percent, 4/10, Satisfactory, F—actually communicate even

less about what students have done well or need to do to improve. By contrast, teacher comments that focus on student work and not on individual student characteristics can increase students' motivation and desire to learn.

Black and Wiliam (1998) point to the benefits of replacing judgmental feedback with specific, descriptive, and immediate feedback. When the goal is to increase student motivation and learning, productive feedback tells students what they are doing right, pinpointing strengths and helping learners develop those strengths even further. For some students, receiving this feedback in writing and having time to reflect on it is sufficient. Other students need face-to-face teacher feedback to reinforce what they have done well.

Effective teacher feedback describes why an answer is right or wrong in specific terms that students understand. Students can also generate their own descriptive feedback by comparing their work with teacher-provided exemplars or posted samples. They can then compare their own feedback with that of their teacher.

Descriptive feedback should provide ways for students to improve in clear, constructive language. Instead of simply labeling student errors or omissions, effective feedback guides students to better performance throughout the learning process. Useful comments focus specifically on improving only one area at a time.

Finally, teacher feedback for learning draws an even bigger picture by telling students where they are now relative to the defined learning targets—and where teachers ultimately want them to be. By modeling for students a variety of suggestions designed to narrow the gap between where they are and where they should be headed, teachers can help students learn to generate their own strategies for improvement.

The Skills of Self-Assessment

Eventually, we want students to be able to direct their own learning. Yet it often seems unclear just how students will achieve this goal. Assessment for learning helps students become self-directed learners by developing their self-assessment skills. The principles of assessment for learning are interrelated: Just as involving students in the assessment process helps make assessment more like instruction, students need to learn to self-assess so that they can use the descriptive feedback from the teacher to its best advantage. Sadler (1989) and Atkin, Black, and Coffey (2001) describe a model of formative assessment in which learners continually ask themselves three questions as they self-assess.

Where Am I Trying to Go?

Students need clearly articulated, concise learning targets to be able to answer this first question. Learning is easier when learners understand what goal they are trying to achieve, the purpose of achieving the goal, and the specific attributes of success. Teachers should continually help students clarify the intended learning as the lessons unfold—not just at the beginning of a unit of study. Teachers share learning intentions with students when they

- Phrase objectives in terms that begin with "We are learning to . . ." or "I can . . ."
- Ask students to read the objectives aloud and ask clarifying questions.
- Separate what they want students to do—the instructions for completing the task—from what they want students to learn. Otherwise, the directions might overshadow the intended learning.
- Inform students why they need to learn what comes next and how it connects to previous and future learning.
- Display the learning objectives in the classroom.
- Provide students with examples of outstanding work as well as samples of lesser quality so that they can see the differences.
- Ask students to rephrase the learning targets or describe what attainment of a target looks

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like (Arter & Busick, 2001; Clarke, 2001).

Where Am I Now?

Students can practice comparing their work to models of high-quality work and trying to identify the differences. They can use teacher feedback from formative assessments to gather evidence of what they know and can do relative to the defined learning target. They can use teacher questions designed to prompt students to reflect on what they have learned individually relative to the intended learning. All of these strategies help students ascertain—and, even more important, learn *how* to ascertain—where they are and where they need to be, an awareness that is central to their ultimate success.

How Do I Close the Gap?

Assessment for learning helps students know what to do to move from their current position to the final learning goal. To meet learning goals, students must participate fully in creating the goals, analyzing assessment data, and developing a plan of action to achieve the next goal (Clarke, 2001).

Students should learn question-and-answer strategies that they can use to close the gap: What do I need to change in my work to improve its quality? What specific help do I need to make these changes? From whom can I get help? What resources do I need?

Sadler (1989) notes that a steady flow of descriptive feedback to students encourages continual self-assessment around what constitutes quality. Keeping students connected to a vision of quality as the unit of study progresses helps them close the gap by formulating their next steps in learning.

All Students Learning Well

The habits and skills of self-assessment are within the grasp and capabilities of almost every student. Students take greater responsibility for their own learning when they regularly assess themselves (Shepard, 2001). In the hands of trained teachers, assessment for learning breeds confidence in learning. It provides students with opportunities for monitoring and communicating to others their own progress.

Educators open the door to using assessment in more productive ways when they acknowledge that students respond differently to the use of test scores as threats of punishment or promises of reward. Those who succeed keep striving; those who fail may give up. By contrast, most students respond positively to classroom assessment environments that promote success rather than simply measure it.

Students demonstrate unprecedented score gains on standardized assessments when their teachers apply the principles of assessment for learning in the classroom (Black and Wiliam, 1998). With appropriate training, teachers can improve the accuracy of their day-to-day assessments, make their feedback to students descriptive and informative, and increase the involvement of students in the entire assessment process. In this way, classroom assessment for learning becomes a school improvement tool that helps create responsible, engaged, and self-directed learners.

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