

Assessment for Teaching

Extract from Chapter 1: Professional learning teams and decision-making

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Development, not deficit

The use of assessment to inform teaching has major consequences for classroom practice, requiring teachers to recognise a range of abilities in their classes and to teach accordingly. Rather than teaching all students as though they are working at the same level, teachers are encouraged to use targeted instruction, in which students at different levels are taught different skills and knowledge, depending on what they are ready to learn. The ultimate form of targeted instruction would be to teach each student individually. However, we argue that this is not necessary, since students in most classes can be grouped into three, four or five readiness groups for teaching purposes. It is rare for more groups to be needed.

The more significant change occurs in the minds of teachers and school leaders, where the long-standing practice of assuming a particular standard for a particular year level is abandoned. That assumption encourages the view that students who do not meet the standard are operating below the expected level, so attention focuses on what they cannot do. The developmental approach does not establish a standard or expectation that some students may not meet. Instead, it recognises the developmental level at which students are actually operating, and targets instruction to focus on the skills and knowledge the student needs to develop in order to move to the next level. The focus is on development, not deficit.

Skills, not scores

A part of this change in attitude toward assessment is the recognition that scores such as percentages, and grades such as A's and B's, are not helpful or informative representations of assessment. Standardised scores and grades tell us only where a student appears on a scale relative to other students. They do not tell us what the student is ready to learn – what actual skills or knowledge they have learned – or what they are ready to be taught next. If students are given tests to assess their progress through different stages of development, the important comparison is between their current skill level and the result of their previous skills assessment, not between their results and those of other students. Moreover, for reasons that will be explained later, in this approach students are tested at a level where they are likely to answer approximately 50 per cent of questions correctly. This is the level at which they are likely to learn most, but this change can be difficult to accept for students who are accustomed to receiving a grade (for example, 'A') or a high percentage score. Teachers, too, can struggle to accept that a high score for a student is not helpful. Nevertheless, as the chapters to come will make clear, greater progress in learning can be achieved by this approach – one that emphasises skills, not scores.

Evidence, not inference

Teachers bring many skills and strengths to the classroom, including knowledge of their discipline, understanding of student learning styles, resource and teaching strategies, ability to select suitable activities for students, classroom-management skills, and their home background and its influence on learning. They may also bring intuitions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their students. These intuitions can encourage teachers to make inferences about the intellectual ability, or academic potential, of individual students. An evidence-based approach ensures that teachers' inferences are founded on observable and recordable behaviour. Because these behaviours provide evidence of skills that can be located on a developmental progression, they form a useful indicator of a student's progress. However, when teachers discuss their students, unsupported inferences or intuitions can sometimes begin to

replace these pieces of evidence. One of the advantages of working in a team is that intuitions and inferences can be tested or challenged by colleagues. In many cases, teachers' intuitions are tested and confirmed, and this can provide great benefit in terms of building their confidence. The members of teacher teams can help each other to stay on track by reminding each other to rely on evidence, not inference. This can be done quite simply – it is only necessary to focus on how an idea or suggestion will change what students do, say, make or write and ask how this will enable more accurate (valid) inferences.

More than tests

It should never be assumed that tests provide the only acceptable evidence of learning. Additional data, in the form of classroom observations, are required to provide evidence of student progress to complement test results. Teachers often feel that a test result does not match their view of a student's ability. Inevitably, factors other than the student's ability will interfere with test results. But this will not happen with every student in the class. Teachers can sometimes be distressed by two or three student results that are inconsistent with their expectations. Other evidence of student ability should always be sought to complement test results. Written assignments can provide additional evidence of literacy skills, including knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and logic. Work on a Maths problem can provide evidence of method or strategy that is not mere trial and error. A class presentation by a student can provide evidence of planning and organisation as well as verbal ability and knowledge. An alert teacher can make many observations that provide evidence of how each student is progressing, and all these observations can help to inform teaching, giving teachers a more complete picture of what their students are ready to learn. It is certainly acceptable – in fact, necessary – for teachers to use more than tests as a source of assessment data to inform teaching.

A focus on students

When teachers meet as a Professional Learning Teams (PLT), they may share stories of their pedagogical methods, classroom strategies or teaching techniques. These may be 'success' stories, telling how a teaching method or approach has succeeded in engaging a class or communicating a new concept; or they may be stories of failure, telling how a lot of hard work in planning, preparation and execution led to a disappointing outcome. Whether positive or negative, what these stories have in common is that they are focused more on the teacher than on the students. They emphasise what the teacher does, but not what the student must do in order to learn what is being 'taught'. They illustrate the old joke about the teacher who says, 'I taught him; he just didn't learn.' By directing teachers to use assessment data to shape classroom practice, the approach described in this book shifts the focus from the teachers to the students. The more effective PLT groups focus on what students do, say, make or write, and on how teaching strategies and student activities improve the quality of students' performance. Effective pedagogical techniques are crucial, and student learning will not be achieved without them, but successful teaching begins with the accurate assessment of the students' readiness to learn, and when teachers gather to share their experiences, it is crucial that they talk about students, not about teachers.

In a successful PLT, this strong focus on the learning readiness of students leads to a further shift in thinking among the team members. Their level of involvement in understanding and assisting each other's work includes engagement with the specific intervention points of one another's students. The result is that the team effectively takes joint ownership of, or responsibility for, all the students taught by the PLT. Through helping each other, the team members find collaborative ways to fulfill their primary responsibility – the welfare and progress of the students. As this shift in thinking embeds itself, it broadens so that whenever teachers meet, their focus is on the students. Ultimately, this attitude finds expression through the habit of talking about 'our' students, rather than 'my' students.

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