



Assessments for Learning are Critical to Student Success

as•sess•ment (noun) ə sɛssmənt

1. evaluation - a judgment about something based on an understanding of the situation

Encarta World English Dictionary (2007)

For many of us in education these days, it is hard to look beyond the word “judgment” in that definition, as current assessment practices in our nation appear to judge us, our students and our schools, often based on the results of one standardized test.

Teachers know these assessments do not accurately reflect all their students know, or all they have gained over the course of the year. According to the most recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, the American public knows it as well. When asked which assessment methods would provide the most accurate picture of a student’s academic progress, Americans identified both *student work* and *teacher observations* as more indicative of student growth than test scores (Bushaw & Gallup, 2008).

Fortunately, there is more to assessment than formal, high-stakes exams. Effective assessment is not only summative, but formative. Assessment is, as defined by Black and Wiliam (1998), “all those activities undertaken by teachers – and by their students in assessing themselves – that provide information . . . to modify teaching and learning activities” (p. 139). It’s not a snapshot, but a map. Effective assessment includes not only assessment of learning, but assessment for learning.

Assessment for learning begins when teachers identify students’ needs as the basis for planning instruction. Authentic assessment is continual and is integral to the curriculum. It entails a variety of formative assessment strategies, including effective observation, leveling of students’ reading ability, conferences focused on essential skills and analysis of student work. These measures will help teachers and students alike to gain dependable information about student learning and how it can be used to inform instruction, as well as to evaluate performance (Stiggins, 1999; Wiggins, 1998).

In a comprehensive study of assessment, Black and Wiliam (1998) found that improvements in formative assessment in the classroom led to significant learning

gains for students, especially for those identified as low achievers. The issue, then, is not the value of assessments for learning, but the degree to which teachers have been equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to develop and implement an assessment plan that will positively impact student learning.

Stiggins and Chappuis (2006) identify five guidelines for teachers in designing an effective assessment plan:

- The assessment plan must have a *clear purpose*, one that specifies who will use the information gleaned from the assessments, and to what end.
- *Clear learning targets* for students should be set – targets that are focused on the essential skills students need and value.
- An effective assessment plan should be of *sound design*, using quality materials that match learning targets, ensuring meaningful and accurate results.
- The plan must rely upon *effective communication* between teacher and students, with students aware of assessment methods and results.
- Finally, *students must be involved* in all aspects of the assessment plan – setting and assessing their own goals and reflecting upon their learning.

Such a comprehensive assessment plan that truly addresses student learning is no easy feat, and will require extensive teacher study and collaboration to make it work in the schools. However, if assessment is indeed a “judgment . . . based on an understanding of a situation” (Encarta, 2007), who better to understand and to judge than the students and teachers themselves?

References

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Research in Action

Assessment Practices Across IER Districts

Looking in on IER classrooms across the districts, we see teachers at all levels using various forms of assessment – assessment that not only measures progress but that also directs student learning.

Mary Pishnery, kindergarten teacher at Glenbrook Elementary School in Euclid, knows that assessments of very young children include focused observations of students in the classroom. Frequent observations of her own children, she states, provide her with a wealth of insight into how each student learns. She watches to see how the students interact with others, how they use learning materials, and how they transition from one activity to another. Mary also uses quick, five minute individual conferences to determine if a student has learned a new skill or has comprehended a story. After a read aloud, students are invited to retell the story for a quick assessment of understanding. Even at this young age, children are on their journey through Bloom's assessment beginning with demonstrating basic knowledge.



A kindergartner demonstrates comprehension to Mary Pishnery through a retelling.

Another of Mary's favorite forms of assessment is a student journal. "In September it is often just scribble lines, but as the year moves on, the scribbles turn into words, sentences, and real stories." Assessments for young children are artifacts of children's understanding, they are ongoing and embedded, they are aligned to academic standards, and they guide the teacher's instruction.

Kathryn Gibson, a third grade teacher at Indian Hills Elementary School in Euclid, has a most compelling way of constantly assessing her students in literacy. Kathryn uses "oral presentations" throughout the day, in which the students are encouraged to share thoughts, ideas, and opinions expressively. Vocabulary is part of her daily instruction and she requires students to respond using extended sentences.



Kathryn Gibson and her third graders hold a Morning Meeting to connect with each other.

As students share during their Morning Meetings, they are becoming accustomed to thinking about their posture, volume and presence as they speak to their peers. Children are involved in focused instruction daily and classroom demonstrations with each other. As the students respond within her safe and encouraging classroom environment, Kathryn is always evaluating and fine-tuning their growth.

Informal Assessments for Classroom Use

- **Daily Writing**
- **Journal Entries**
- **Logs**
- **Classroom Participation**
- **Oral Presentations**
- **Interest Inventories or Surveys**
- **Performance Assessments**
- **Running Records**
- **Retellings – Comprehension Checks**
- **Reading Responses, Summaries, Notes on Literature Circles, Preparation Sheets**
- **Interviews, Conferences, Small Group Discussions**
- **Checklists, Anecdotal Notes**
- **Technology-Related Projects – Electronic Portfolios, PowerPoint Presentations, Video Presentations**
- **Photos – Traditional or Digital**
- **Self Evaluations**
- **Listen (audiotape) to Student's Oral Reading**
- **Artifacts, Posters, Other Tangible Projects and Products**

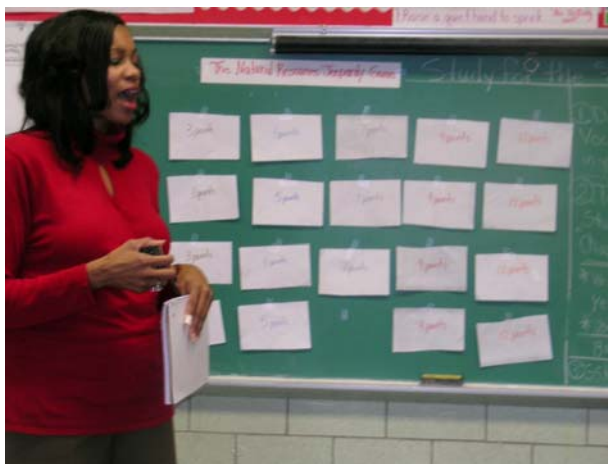
Adapted from Mary Girard, 2001

In Warrensville Heights, several teachers have identified the need to help students identify and explore their own questions as a key to understanding both text and conversation.

The fine arts teachers at Randallwood School, the district's fifth and sixth grade building, are part of a professional learning community focusing on literacy. Together, they have identified the need to help their students use questions to dig deeper into their lessons and assignments. Because their classes - art, music and physical education - rely more on oral communication than on written, it was natural for them to focus on listening comprehension. They see questioning as a key component of this skill, and they want to help their students extend this into their reading. They will start by teaching students to use questions to demonstrate effective listening comprehension.

Together, Wanda Davis, Paula Gehring, Suzan Ingersoll, Pamela Sika and Miya Nettis are developing formative assessments to target students in need of more support in this area. They are creating common rubrics and observational checklists to monitor how students are using questions to aid their comprehension. Paula speaks for the group when she describes these assessments as tools to help target instruction. "The checklists will help us identify students who need more focus on this skill. For some kids it is just natural, it is just what they do." Additionally, the checklists will help teachers identify the types of questions that students use and guide them as they teach the students how to craft questions that will contribute to deeper comprehension.

At Eastwood Elementary School in Warrensville Heights, fourth grade teacher Angela Means assesses comprehension through her students' ability to construct questions from their reading material. In their study of natural resources, students wrote questions based on their understanding of the main ideas and important details of the chapters they read. Their questions were then used for a class Jeopardy game. Ms. Means was able to observe and to assess the



Angela Means uses students' questions to evaluate their learning as well as to review material.

Comprehension Assessment Possibilities

- **Content Autobiography**
- **Response Wall**
- **K-W-L-Q-W (Know, Want to know, Learned, further Questions, Where are answers)**
- **Graphic Organizers**
 - **Web**
 - **Comparison**
 - **Character Sociogram**
 - **Story Map**
 - **Chapter Grid**
 - **Ideas and Details Chart**
 - **Sequence**
 - **Cause and Effects**
- **Retelling**
- **Learning Log**
- **Web**
- **DRTA (Directed Reading Thinking Activity)**
- **Comic Strip**
- **QAR (Question/Answer Relationships)**
- **Read/Pair Share**
- **Read/Write/Pair/Share**
- **Jigsaw**
- **Diagram**
- **Semantic Map**
- **Interview**
- **Review**
- **Venn Diagram**
- **Anticipation Guide**
- **Quick Write**
- **Assisted Reading**
- **Readers' Theatre**
- **SQ3R (Study, Question, Read, Recite, Review)**
- **Reciprocal Teacher**

Adapted from Mary Girard, 2001

students' level of understanding based on the questions that they crafted for the game. So, while the Jeopardy game was a fun way for students to review the material, the questions helped the teacher gain insight into each student's comprehension.

As participants in IER literacy workshops last spring at Euclid's Forest Park and Central middle schools, seventh grade reading teacher Kathy Kadlub and speech-language pathologist Anne Schwartz adapted a workshop assignment on using reading strategies in the

(Continued on page 4)

<http://www.jcu.edu/graduate/ier/> Check it Out

Have you ever wanted to print off a copy of the Comprehensive Literacy Framework for use in planning your literacy block? Perhaps your grade level team needs to identify a list of references for guided reading. Or, just maybe, you'd like to know more about the background of the consultants who come to your school and into your classroom.

You now have a place to go — the IER website. The website, which is relatively new, provides our most recent newsletters and stories. It has pdf files of IER's Great Schools Framework and Comprehensive Literacy Framework, along with descriptive narratives detailing the components of each. You can view IER's mission, vision and values, and look up our bibliography to reference books for your room. The website also provides links to some of *our* favorite sites, including Responsive Classroom and National School Reform Faculty (home of Critical Friends).

IER's website is still a work in progress, and we would love to have your feedback as we continue to build it. What information would you like to see on the site; what kinds of tools would be helpful to you as a teacher, a principal, a parent? Is there anything your colleagues and you would like to know about this organization? Are there stories *you* would like to tell about your relationship with IER? Please, let us know. In the meantime, check out <http://www.jcu.edu/graduate/ier/>. Who knows? You might even see a picture of yourself in action!

Note: Please send your feedback, suggestions and questions to Rebecca Rumsey at rcrumsey@cox.net.



Assessment (Continued from page 3)

classroom. In the process, the strategies they selected became meaningful assessment tools for the teachers and, in some cases, for the students themselves.

Already in the midst of preparation for the OAT, Kathy focused on the importance of modeling and practicing thoughtful reading (Daniels and Zemelman, *Subjects Matter*, 2004) using the strategies of Think-Alouds, Read Alouds and Exit Slips. She began by reading a sample test passage and then thinking out loud after each paragraph while highlighting important information. Students followed suit, highlighting additional information and then debating their responses to questions posed about each selection. Before leaving class, students completed an exit slip, indicating one thought or idea that had helped them become a "smart" reader that day.

In a follow-up lesson, Kathy's students became "teachers for the day," working in small groups to teach the class how to effectively read a passage. After reading students' final reflections on the activity, Kathy noted, "I learned that many of my students were not thinking about their own reading and did not grasp the idea of reading as a step-by-step process. . . . This activity got my students actively involved in their learning."

For her own assessment activity, Anne Schwartz decided to use the KWL chart as an intervention strategy for a student being assessed for a possible learning disability. Topic maintenance and answering questions in both oral and written form were targeted areas of intervention for this student. "The assessment team was curious if the student would be able to state first what he knew about a topic and then to formulate specific questions for himself."

The lesson began with a book walk given by the classroom teacher to provide background knowledge about the topic, followed by a request for students to complete the KWL chart. The targeted student struggled to formulate his ideas about what he knew and was unable to integrate basic details about the topic into a cohesive drawing. "This was valuable information to the assessment team," concluded Anne, "because it assisted the team to frame the student's thought process through a view of whole to part . . . part to whole conceptual thinking."

Assessments such as these provide valuable information for teachers — information they can then use to inform instruction and enhance learning. There are many ways to incorporate assessment for learning into the daily activities of the classroom. The key is to make assessment meaningful to you as a teacher, and to your students as learners.