

Assessment Through the Student's Eyes

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Rather than sorting students into winners and losers, assessment for learning can put all students on a winning streak.

Historically, a major role of assessment has been to detect and highlight differences in student learning in order to rank students according to their achievement. Such assessment experiences have produced winners and losers. Some students succeed early and build on winning streaks to learn more as they grow; others fail early and often, falling farther and farther behind.

As we all know, the mission of schools has changed. Today's schools are less focused on merely sorting students and more focused on helping all students succeed in meeting standards. This evolution in the mission of schools means that we can't let students who have not yet met standards fall into losing streaks, succumb to hopelessness, and stop trying.

Our evolving mission compels us to embrace a new vision of assessment that can tap the wellspring of confidence, motivation, and learning potential that resides within every student. First, we need to tune in to the emotional dynamics of the assessment experience from the point of view of students—both assessment winners and assessment losers. These two groups experience assessment practices in vastly different ways, as shown in “The Assessment Experience,” p. 24. To enable all students to experience the productive emotional dynamics of winning, we need to move from exclusive reliance on assessments that verify learning to the use of assessments that support learning—that is, assessments for learning.

The Assessment Experience	
For Students on Winning Streaks	For Students on Losing Streaks
Assessment results provide	
Continual evidence of success	Continual evidence of failure
The student feels	
Hopeful and optimistic	Hopeless
Empowered to take productive action	Initially panicked, giving way to resignation
The student thinks	
It's all good. I'm doing fine.	This hurts. I'm not safe here.
See the trend? I succeed as usual.	I just can't do this . . . again.
I want more success.	I'm confused. I don't like this—help!
School focuses on what I do well.	Why is it always about what I can't do?
I know what to do next.	Nothing I try seems to work.

Feedback helps me.	Feedback is criticism. It hurts.
Public success feels good.	Public failure is embarrassing.
The student becomes more likely to	
Seek challenges.	Seek what's easy.
Seek exciting new ideas.	Avoid new concepts and approaches.
Practice with gusto.	Become confused about what to practice.
Take initiative.	Avoid initiative.
Persist in the face of setbacks.	Give up when things become challenging.
Take risks and stretch—go for it!	Retreat and escape—trying is too dangerous!
These actions lead to	
Self-enhancement	Self-defeat, self-destruction
Positive self-fulfilling prophecy	Negative self-fulfilling prophecy
Acceptance of responsibility	Denial of responsibility
Manageable stress	High stress
Feeling that success is its own reward	No feelings of success; no reward
Curiosity, enthusiasm	Boredom, frustration, fear
Continuous adaptation	Inability to adapt
Resilience	Yielding quickly to defeat
Strong foundations for future success	Failure to master prerequisites for future success

Assessment for Learning

Assessment for learning turns day-to-day assessment into a teaching and learning process that enhances (instead of merely monitoring) student learning. Extensive research conducted around the world shows that by consistently applying the principles of assessment for learning, we can produce impressive gains in student achievement, especially for struggling learners (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Assessment for learning begins when teachers share achievement targets with students, presenting those expectations in student-friendly language accompanied by examples of exemplary student work. Then, frequent self-assessments provide students (and teachers) with continual access to descriptive feedback in amounts they can manage effectively without being overwhelmed. Thus, students can chart their trajectory toward the transparent achievement targets their teachers have established.

The students' role is to strive to understand what success looks like, to use feedback from each assessment to discover where they are now in relation to where they want to be, and to determine how to do better the next time. As students become increasingly proficient, they learn to generate their own descriptive feedback and set goals for what comes next on their

journey.

Teachers and students are partners in the assessment for learning process. For example, teachers might have students study samples of work that vary in quality and collaborate in creating their own student-friendly version of a performance assessment scoring rubric. Or students might create practice versions of multiple-choice tests that parallel the content of an upcoming final exam, which they can then use to analyze their own strengths and weaknesses and to focus their final preparation for that exam. Students can accumulate evidence of their learning in growth portfolios. They can also become partners with teachers in communicating about their own learning successes by leading their parent/teacher conferences.

Assessment for learning provides both students and teachers with understandable information in a form they can use immediately to improve performance. In this context, students become both self-assessors and consumers of assessment information. As they experience and understand their own improvement over time, learners begin to sense that success is within reach if they keep trying. This process can put them on a winning streak and keep them there.

When we use assessment for learning, assessment becomes far more than merely a one-time event stuck onto the end of an instructional unit. It becomes a series of interlaced experiences that enhance the learning process by keeping students confident and focused on their progress, even in the face of occasional setbacks.

The goal of assessment for learning is not to eliminate failure, but rather to keep failure from becoming chronic and thus inevitable in the mind of the learner. Duke University basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski has pointed out that the key to winning is to avoid losing twice in a row (Kanter, 2004, p. 251). He meant that if you lose once and fix it, you can remain confident. Losing twice, though, can raise questions, crack that confidence, and make recovery more difficult. So when learners suffer a failure, we must get them back to success as quickly as possible to restore their confidence in their capabilities. This is the emotional dynamic of assessment for learning.

Scenario 1: Set Students Up for Success

Here is an example of the use of assessment for learning that builds student confidence from the start. Notice who develops and uses the assessment.

A high school English teacher assigns students to read three novels by the same author and develop a thesis statement about a common theme, consistent character development, or social commentary in the novels. They must then defend that thesis in a term paper with references. To set students up for success, the teacher begins by providing them with a sample of an outstanding paper to read and analyze. The next day, the class discusses what made the sample outstanding.

As their next assignment, the teacher gives students a sample paper of poor quality. Again, they analyze and evaluate its features in some detail. Comparing the two papers, students list essential differences. The class then uses this analysis to collaboratively decide on the keys to a high-quality paper.

After identifying and defining those keys, the students share in the process of transforming them into a rubric—a set of rating scales depicting a continuum of quality for each key. The teacher provides examples of student work to illustrate each level on the quality continuum.

Only after these specific understandings are in place do students draft their papers. Then they exchange drafts, analyzing and evaluating one another's work and providing descriptive feedback on how to improve it, always using the language of the rubric. If students want descriptive feedback from their teacher on any particular dimension of quality, they can request and will receive it. The paper is finished when the student says it is finished. In the end, not every paper is outstanding, but most are of high quality, and each student is confident of that fact before submitting his or her work for final evaluation and grading.

(Stiggins, in press; Scenario 1 adapted by permission).

Scenario 2: Help Students Turn Failure into Success

Here is an illustration of assessment for learning in mathematics used to help a struggling elementary student find the path to recovery from a chronic sense of failure. Notice how the teacher highlights the meaning of success and turns the responsibility over to the student. In addition, notice how the learner has already begun to internalize the keys to her own success. Gail is a 5th grader who gets her math test back with “60 percent” marked at the top. She knows this means another F. So her losing streak continues, she thinks. She’s ready to give up on ever connecting with math.

But then her teacher distributes another paper—a worksheet the students will use to learn from their performance on the math test. What’s up with this? The worksheet has several columns. Column one lists the 20 test items by number. Column two lists what math proficiency each item tested. The teacher calls the class’s attention to the next two columns: Right and Wrong. She asks the students to fill in those columns with checks for each item to indicate their performance on the test. Gail checks 12 right and 8 wrong.

The teacher then asks the students to evaluate as honestly as they can why they got each incorrect item wrong and to check column five if they made a simple mistake and column six if they really don’t understand what went wrong. Gail discovers that four of her eight incorrect answers were caused by careless mistakes that she knows how to fix. But four were math problems she really doesn’t understand how to solve.

Next, the teacher goes through the list of math concepts covered item by item, enabling Gail and her classmates to determine exactly what concepts they don’t understand. Gail discovers that all four of her wrong answers that reflect a true lack of understanding arise from the same gap in her problem-solving ability: subtracting 3-digit numbers with regrouping. If she had just avoided those careless mistakes and had also overcome this one gap in understanding, she might have received 100 percent. Imagine that! If she could just do the test over . . .

She can. Because Gail’s teacher has mapped out precisely what each item on the test measures, the teacher and students can work in partnership to group the students according to the math concepts they haven’t yet mastered. The teacher then provides differentiated instruction to the groups focused on their conceptual misunderstandings. Together the class also plans strategies that everyone can use to avoid simple mistakes. When that work is complete, the teacher gives students a second form of the same math test. When Gail gets the test back with a grade of 100 percent, she jumps from her seat with arms held high. Her winning streak begins (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2004; Scenario 2 adapted by permission).

Redefining Our Assessment Future

We know how to deliver professional development that will give practitioners the tools and technologies they need to use assessment effectively in the service of student success. (Stiggins et al., 2004; Stiggins & Chappuis, 2006). Thus far, however, the immense potential of assessment for learning has gone largely untapped because we have failed to deliver the proper tools into the hands of teachers and school leaders. If we are to fulfil our mission of leaving no child behind, we must adjust our vision of excellence in assessment in at least two important ways that will help us balance assessment of and assessment for learning.

First, we must expand the criteria by which we evaluate the quality of our assessments at all levels and in all contexts. Traditionally, we have judged quality in terms of the attributes of the resulting scores; these scores must lead to valid and reliable inferences about student achievement. As a result, schools have lavished attention on characteristics of the instruments

that produce such scores. In the future, however, we must recognize that assessment is about far more than the test score's dependability—it also must be about the score's effect on the learner. Even the most valid and reliable assessment cannot be regarded as high quality if it causes a student to give up.

We must begin to evaluate our assessments in terms of both the quality of the evidence they yield and the effect they have on future learning. High-quality assessments encourage further learning; low-quality assessments hinder learning. Understanding the emotional dynamics of the assessment experience from the student's perspective is crucial to the effective use of assessments to improve schools.

Second, we must abandon the limiting belief that adults represent the most important assessment consumers or data-based decision makers in schools. Students' thoughts and actions regarding assessment results are at least as important as those of adults. The students' emotional reaction to results will determine what they do in response. Whether their score is high or low, students respond productively when they say, "I understand. I know what to do next. I can handle this. I choose to keep trying." From here on, the result will be more learning. The counterproductive response is, "I don't know what this means. I have no idea what to do next. I'm probably too dumb to learn this anyway. I give up." Here, the learning stops. In standards-driven schools, only one of these responses works, especially for students who have yet to meet standards. Assessment for learning is about eliciting that productive response to assessment results from students every time. It can produce winning streaks for all students.

References

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