

My Assessment Philosophy

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Alongside classroom management and instructional practices, assessment is a topic of great importance to most educators. As a pre-service teacher, I make no exception, and have come to recognize the true value of effective assessment in the classroom. For this reason, I will outline my assessment philosophy in the paragraphs that follow. My philosophy will be built around five key points: (1) assessment is more than paper and pencil tests, (2) assessments must provide students with a fair opportunity to demonstrate their understanding, (3) assessment should be used frequently throughout the instructional period, (4) assessment results should foster continuous improvement for both teachers and students, and (5) assessments should be constructed and evaluated in collaboration with colleagues whenever possible.

Traditionally, the term assessment brings to mind lengthy paper and pencil tests completed at the end of a unit for the purpose of adding another mark to the mark book. Assessments are much more than that, however. At the heart of assessment is providing students with an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding. Assessments can therefore include such things as projects and performances, presentations, and portfolios, assignments, quizzes, exit slips, and much more. They can be either formal or informal and can be completed over various time periods (an hour, a day, a week, a month, or even a semester). Regardless of the type of assessment used, one thing must be clear, the word assessment is not synonymous with “test”, nor does it imply that a grade will be given. This is not to say that paper and pencil tests should be eliminated from one’s assessment practices altogether, but rather that they are only one of several types of assessment.

Although effective assessments provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned, providing this opportunity alone does not constitute assessment. True assessment allows students to communicate their understanding in a way that is both *fair* and *reliable*. This means that the purpose and criteria for the assessment must be clearly communicated to the students *before* it is evaluated, that the assessment must be aligned with instructional material, and that the assessment should cater to the strengths of different learners. It means that students should be encouraged to do their best, and should be given the chance to revise and improve their work after submission provided they have earned that opportunity. Additionally, paper and pencil tests must be carefully constructed and reviewed, and test items should be challenging but not impossible. Furthermore, test directions should be clear, but should not give away the answer, scoring should be objective, and appropriate accommodations (ex. oral test, speech-to-text software, computer test, etc.) should be provided as necessary. For projects and performances, it means that students should participate in the construction of the rubrics used to assess their work, and should be provided with frequent checkpoints along the way to prevent unnecessary frustrations with the final result. If we ensure that assessments are both fair and reliable, then students will be motivated to learn.

A third important quality of assessments is that they be used frequently throughout the learning period. In fact, assessments used before, during, and after instruction provide the most comprehensive summary of student and teacher progress. Assessments used at the beginning of instruction, also called diagnostic assessments or pre-assessments allow the teacher to assess students’ prior knowledge. They can be used at the beginning of the semester to ensure that all students are equipped with prerequisite knowledge and skills, or they can be used at the beginning of a unit to identify students’ preconceptions. In both cases, they help the teacher to identify students who are in need of extra help, as well as those in need of enrichment. Thus,

they inform a teacher's instructional practices by honing in on the content and method of delivery. Assessments that take place during instruction, called formative assessments, serve a similar purpose. The main difference is that this type of assessment informs the instruction process while it is in progress. As such, they allow teachers to reflect on and improve their instructional strategies while simultaneously providing students with feedback before assigning them a grade. Finally, assessments administered after instruction, or summative assessments can be used to judge the overall quality and success of instruction. These include tests, exams, papers, and projects. They provide closure to a unit and are a measure of whether the students have learned the information presented during instruction. Only summative assessments should be graded.

While it is important to provide frequent opportunities for assessment throughout the learning period, the value of assessment is diminished if assessment results are not used to provide both teachers and students with feedback that fosters continuous improvement. In other words, evaluating assessments should involve more than simply assigning a grade. Teachers must use assessment results to identify students in need of intervention or enrichment, and to pinpoint areas of instruction that are in need of improvement. This may involve seeking advice from colleagues or even students as necessary. From the point of view of the student, assessment results should be used to monitor and track progress. They should be accompanied by formative feedback that is encouraging and provides some indication of how they can improve in the future. The nature of this feedback will determine whether or not students are motivated to learn.

A final consideration to be made when it comes to assessment is how it can be used to establish a collaborative culture within the school system. Constructing and evaluating common assessments as part of a collaborative team not only provides teachers with feedback on their instruction, but also provides students with access to a consistent and guaranteed curriculum regardless of their teacher. In other words, creating and administering common assessments eliminates the possibility for a "teacher lotto". Other benefits of this type of collaboration include learning from others' successes and challenges, seeking professional advice from colleagues and analyzing student results within a larger context. Clearly establishing a collaborative culture by developing, administering and reviewing results of common assessments is sure to benefit both the teacher and the learner.

To summarize, my assessment practices will not be limited to paper and pencil tests, will provide students with fair and reliable opportunities to demonstrate their understanding, will occur frequently throughout the learning process, will provide feedback that fosters continuous improvement for both myself and my students, and will be developed in collaboration with my colleagues where possible.