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“CRITICAL QUESTIONS” SERIES

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What Exactly Do We Mean By Assessment?

As a result of increased educational reform initiatives, there has been a recent emphasis on developing deeper understandings of assessment information in order to improve instructional decision-making. Yet, still too frequently, when someone says assessment, the picture that pops into heads is that of the good old end of unit quiz or test. For those who are closely tied to accountability, the picture may be of the percentages of students who do or don't meet standard on high stakes standardized tests and whether or not there was Adequate Yearly Progress. In reality, however, there are many faces of assessment and we must resist assigning it a limited role or definition.

An often overlooked role of assessment is that of pre-assessment. For example, why teach a month-long unit on computing fractions if students can already do this? Instructional calendars can provide an important guideline, but if students have mastered a topic, concept, or skill, wouldn't it make sense to move on to another area with which they may struggle? Recent research has revealed basic scientific conceptual gaps among our learners. Knowing these gaps ahead of time could assist us in improving our instructional plan. By more fully utilizing pre-assessment strategies we could potentially use our instructional time more wisely. This could be done in the traditional form of a written test or quiz, but it could also be accomplished through simple classroom discussions or a series of well crafted questions.

Another role of assessment often ignored is that of self-assessment. Educators who allow students to self-evaluate their progress toward identified knowledge, skills, and understandings have discovered a powerful learning and motivational use of assessment. In such classrooms students can be found not only identifying their strengths and weaknesses in the targeted standards, but also setting personal learning goals and becoming self-directed learners. Stiggins call this “assessment *for* learning” rather than “assessment *of* learning”. Seeing assessment from this perspective invites students into the learning process and builds confidence rather than relegating assessment to a thing of mystery imposed externally. In addition, educators can use assessment information to self-assess the effectiveness of their instruction, materials, or programs.

Observation of our students is another potentially valuable source of assessment information. Especially when we know our students well, we can pick up on subtle hints that they are struggling with a concept or having social and emotional difficulties that can negatively impact their learning. Initially, we may not have hard evidence but an observation can propel us to pursue further information to confirm a suspicion that leads to an important instructional intervention.

Students and parents sometimes think of report cards and progress reports as assessments. We must help them understand that report cards and progress reports are not assessments; they are simply the means by which we communicate information about assessments. Student led conferences not only help clarify this, but also provide another avenue to build self-directed, confident learners.

There are many faces of assessment beyond quizzes, tests, and high stakes standardized assessments. We can improve our instructional decision-making by widening our understanding of assessment to include written and verbal forms of pre-assessment, self-assessment, as well as using observation and classroom dialog as important and informative assessment information about our learners.

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