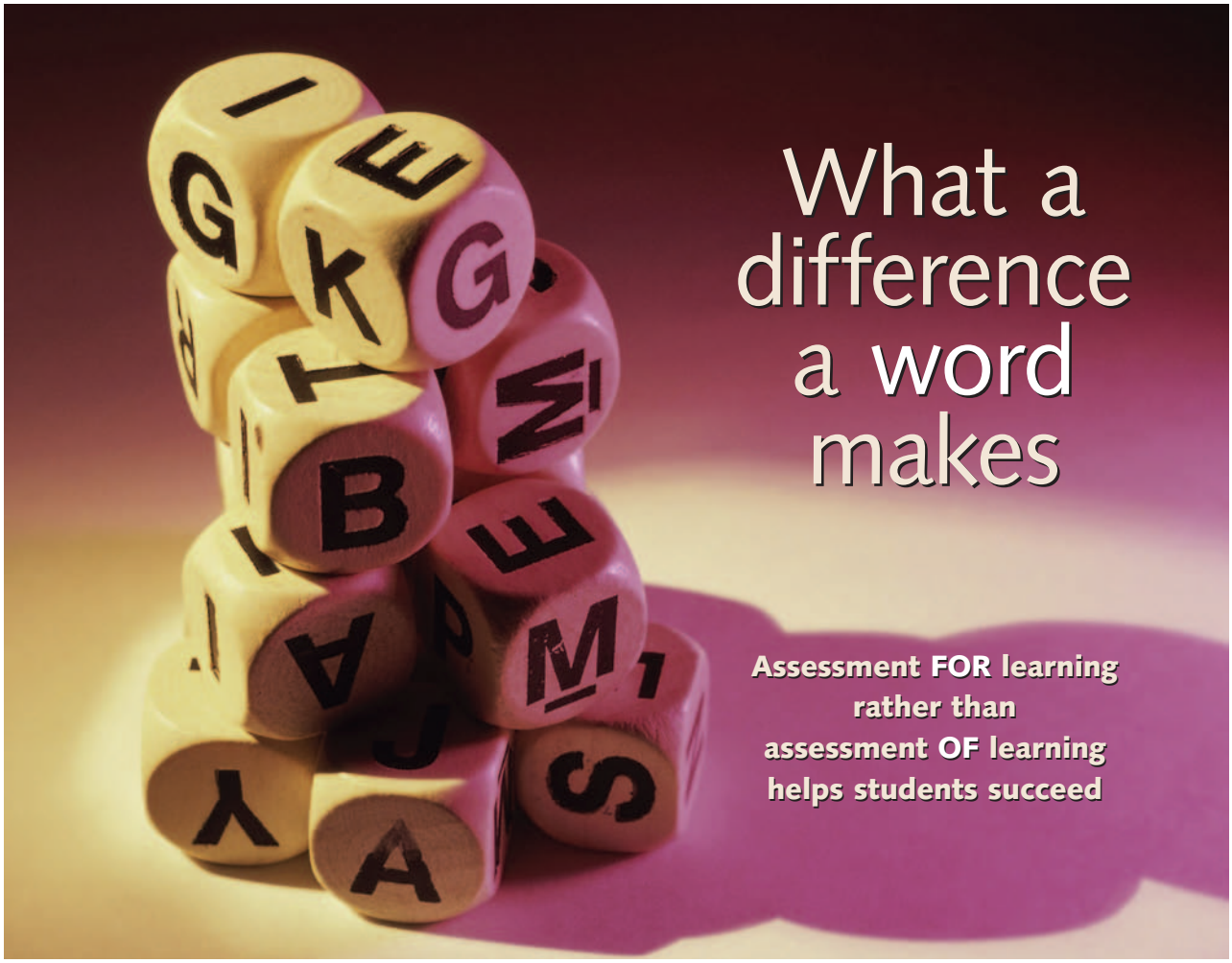

What a difference a word makes

Assessment FOR learning rather than assessment OF learning helps students succeed

BY RICK STIGGINS AND JAN CHAPPUIS

Without question, assessment remains among the very hottest topics in school improvement. High-stakes state accountability assessments and adequate yearly progress continue to represent the driving forces of school improvement these days. But, as accountability systems evolve, attention to this topic has turned in an interesting direction. Educators have concluded that testing once a year does not provide sufficient evidence to inform many crucial, more frequently made instructional decisions, which has generated renewed interest in *formative assessment*.

Traditionally, the term has referred to assessments used to support learning. But, in the current environment, formative assessment as defined by the test publishers has taken on a narrow meaning. In this context, it refers to a system of more frequent summative assessments administered at regular intervals (often quarterly) to determine which students have not yet met state standards — an early warning system, if you will.

We both applaud and, at the same time, challenge this thinking. On the

one hand, it helps us identify students who need help when we still have time to help them. On the other hand, while this very expensive assessment process helps us identify the problem, it doesn't help those students find greater success. For that, we must expand our definition. Enter *assessment for learning*.

Assessment *for* learning happens in the classroom and involves students in every aspect of their own assessment to build their confidence and maximize their achievement. It rests on the understanding that students, not just adults, are data-driven instructional decision makers. Several key features differentiate assessment *for* learning from formative assessment as currently being sold by test publishers: To begin with, state standards are deconstructed into classroom-level learning targets, which we translate into language our students understand so they know what they are responsible for learning. In addition, we turn those classroom-level targets into dependably accurate classroom assessments, aspects of which we integrate into daily instruction. In short, everyone understands the definition of success from the outset and we generate an ongoing flow of descriptive feedback that permits students to watch themselves grow. In this case, students and their teachers become partners in the classroom assessment process, relying on student-involved assessment, record keeping, and communication to help students understand what success looks like, see where they are now, and learn to close the gap between the two.

The good news is that research has shown for years that consistently applying principles of assessment *for* learning has yielded remarkable, if not unprecedented, gains in student achievement, especially for low achievers (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Results verify positive impacts across grade levels and school subjects.

However, the troubling news is that we weren't given the opportunity to learn to apply principles of assessment *for* learning during our preparation to teach. It remains the case that colleges of education often fail to include this kind of assessment training in their programs. And lest we believe that teachers can turn to their principals for assistance in this regard, be advised that assessment training of any sort remains virtually nonexistent in leadership training programs across the nation.

We know what teachers need to know and understand to apply principles of assessment *for* learning effectively in their classrooms. We know what will happen to their students' confidence, motivation, and achievement if they learn those lessons. We know how to deliver these tools to their hands in an efficient and effective manner.

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Competence in assessment *for* learning

The chart on p. 12 details five keys to classroom assessment quality, with each broken down into specific competencies teachers need to master

Sound classroom assessment practice

1. Clear purposes Assessment processes and results serve clear and appropriate purposes.	a. Teachers understand who uses classroom assessment information and know their information needs. b. Teachers understand the relationship between assessment and student motivation and craft assessment experiences to maximize motivation. c. Teachers use classroom assessment processes and results formatively (assessment *for* learning). d. Teachers use classroom assessment results summatively (assessment *of* learning) to inform someone beyond the classroom about students' achievement at a particular point in time. e. Teachers have a comprehensive plan over time for integrating assessment *for* and *of* learning in the classroom.
2. Clear targets Assessments reflect clear and valued student learning targets.	a. Teachers have clear learning targets for students; they know how to turn broad statements of content standards into classroom-level learning targets. b. Teachers understand the various types of learning targets they hold for students. c. Teachers select learning targets focused on the most important things students need to know and be able to do. d. Teachers have a comprehensive plan over time for assessing learning targets.
3. Sound design Learning targets are translated into assessments that yield accurate results.	a. Teachers understand the various assessment methods. b. Teachers choose assessment methods that match intended learning targets. c. Teachers design assessments that serve intended purposes. d. Teachers sample learning appropriately in their assessments. e. Teachers write assessment questions of all types well. f. Teachers avoid sources of mismeasurement that bias results.
4. Effective communication Assessment results are managed well and communicated effectively.	a. Teachers record assessment information accurately, keep it confidential, and appropriately combine and summarize it for reporting (including grades). Such summary accurately reflects current level of student learning. b. Teachers select the best reporting option (grades, narratives, portfolios, conferences) for each context (learning targets and users). c. Teachers interpret and use standardized test results correctly. d. Teachers effectively communicate assessment results to students. e. Teachers effectively communicate assessment results to a variety of audiences outside the classroom, including parents, colleagues, and other stakeholders.
5. Student involvement Students are involved in their own assessment.	a. Teachers make learning targets clear to students. b. Teachers involve students in assessing, tracking, and setting goals for their own learning. c. Teachers involve students in communicating about their own learning.

SOURCE: *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing it Right—Using it Well* by Richard Stiggins, Judy Arter, Jan Chappuis, and Steve Chappuis. (Portland, OR: Assessment Training Institute, 2004). Reprinted with permission.

to tap the full potential of assessment *for* learning (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2004).

First, we need to know why we're assessing. If assessment is the process of gathering evidence to inform instructional decisions, teachers must begin the assessment process by asking:

- What decisions?
- Who's making the decisions?
- What kind of information will be helpful?

The assessment must produce that information, and it must take into account the needs of the student as a crucial decision maker.

Second, quality assessments can arise only from a clear vision of the achievement to be mastered. We cannot dependably assess targets we have not completely defined and mastered ourselves. Neither can we communicate them clearly to students.

Third, we develop and use assessments in a manner that yields accurate results. We select proper assessment methods, high-quality items and scoring guides, and plan for careful sampling of achievement. And we minimize distortion in results due to bias.

Fourth, results must feed into

effective communication systems that deliver accurate information into the hands of the intended user(s) in a timely and understandable manner. For students, this includes receiving descriptive feedback while there is still time to use it to improve.

And finally, students must be taught the skills they need to be in control of their own ultimate academic success: self-assessment and goal setting, reflection, keeping track of and sharing their learning.

Becoming competent in assessment *for* learning — what won't work and why

No Child Left Behind has lit an assessment fire in our nation: All things assessment-related sell fast. But we can't buy assessments that will circumvent teachers' need for deeper assessment expertise. Off-the-shelf assessments may be marketed as "formative assessments," but they don't help teachers understand or apply the strategies that have been proven to increase student learning. They do not show teachers how to make learning targets clear to students, or how to help students differentiate between strong and weak work. They do not help teachers understand what kinds of feedback are most effective or how to find the time to provide that feedback. They do not help teachers show students how to assess their own strengths and weaknesses, nor do they emphasize the motivational power of having students track and share their learning. They cannot substitute for the professional development needed to cause changes in assessment practice in the classroom.

Neither can we "workshop" our way to assessment competence. A professional development model designed to provide a quick workshop fix or to economize on time at the expense of deep understanding will fail. Developing assessment expertise goes beyond teaching people how to create a test. It goes beyond showing how to convert rubric scores to grades or how to develop a standards-based report card. It examines well-established assessment practices that are harmful to students and their learning, like factoring practice work (such as homework) in the final grade, giving tests without first understanding what specific learning each item addresses, and keeping students in the dark about the learning for which they are responsible.

If teachers assign lower grades to late work, give zeros for cheating, or factor attendance into grades, a workshop on grading is unlikely to change such unsound practice. It takes an ongoing investment of cognitive effort for teachers to think and come to embrace arguments for not doing these things, to discuss reasons for wanting to continue those grading practices, and to work out acceptable substitutes that both hold students accountable for developing good work habits and communicate effectively about those work habits.

Students must be taught the skills they need to be in control of their own ultimate academic success: self-assessment and goal setting, reflection, keeping track of and sharing their learning.

Changing habits is not easy. It takes work in and out of class to build assessment *for* learning environments that meet the student's information needs along with the teacher's. Increasing descriptive feedback while reducing evaluative feedback means

that the teacher must figure out ways to comment on the quality of student work and then schedule time for students to act on that feedback before being graded. Teaching students to assess their own work takes class time as well as practice. It is difficult to delete content coverage in order to accommodate these activities on a regular basis — there is already more to teach than there is time.

Developing assessment competencies requires that people rethink both what they do now and what beliefs led them to adopt those practices. It requires that they make decisions about what to give up and what to retool. The workshop model of professional development cannot offer the support needed for such changes.

What will work? Learning teams

In the learning team approach to professional development, participants engage in a combination of independent study and ongoing small-group collaboration with a commitment to helping all group members develop classroom assessment expertise. The process begins with an infusion of new ideas that can come from several sources: attending workshops, reading books and articles, watching videos, and observing other teachers at work. It continues with ongoing opportunities to discuss and work through the cognitive consonance and dissonance that arise when practice and beliefs conflict. But most importantly, it requires that each team member transform new assessment ideas into actual classroom practices with which they experiment. In this way, they and their students learn valuable lessons about what works for them and why.

Few teachers currently use the words "assessment" and "joy" in the same sentence.

When the experiences of such hands-on learning are shared among teammates in regular team meetings, all members benefit from the lessons of each partner. When teams commit to shaping the ideas into new classroom practice, reflecting on the results, and sharing the benefits with each other, professional growth skyrockets. Teams reach their ultimate goal of changing classroom assessment practices in specific ways that benefit students.

This is challenging work and can be even painful at times; few teachers currently use the words "assessment" and "joy" in the same sentence. Yet if we don't begin this dialogue, this study of assessment *for* learning, we are relegating assessment to its accountability role and passing up its potential benefits to students. Let us fundamentally rethink how assessment is used in our classrooms, eliminate its negative effects on students, and act collaboratively to ensure that our classroom assessment practices maximize, not just measure, our students' achievement.

Resources in assessment *for* learning

Research on assessment's impact on student achievement:

- "Creating a system of accountability: The impact of instructional assessment on elementary children's achievement scores," by Samuel J. Meisels, Sally Atkins-Burnett, Yange Xue, Donna DiPrima Bickel, and Seung-Hee Son. (2003). *Educational Policy Analysis Archives, 11*(9), 19. Retrieved from http://epaa.asu.edu/eapp/v11n9/
- "The impact of classroom evaluation on students," by Terence J. Crooks. (1988). *Review of Educational Research, 58*(4), 438-481.
- "The role of classroom assessment in student performance on TIMSS," by Michael C. Rodriguez. (2004). *Applied Measurement in Education, 17*(1), 1-24.
- "The search for methods of group instruction as effective as one-to-one tutoring," by Benjamin Bloom. (1984). *Educational Leadership, 41*(8), 4-17.

Valuable professional development materials:

- *Assessment FOR Learning: An Action Guide for School Leaders,* by Steve Chappuis, Richard J. Stiggins, Judith Arter, and Jan Chappuis. Portland, OR: Assessment Training Institute, 2005.
- *Capturing All of the Reader Through the Reading Assessment System,* by Rachel Billmeyer. Omaha, NE: Dayspring Printing, 2004.
- *Creating Writers,* by Vicki Spandel. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2001.
- *How to Grade for Learning,* by Ken O'Connor. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2002.
- *Scoring Rubrics in the Classroom*, by Judith Arter and Jay McTighe. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2001.

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Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Educational assessment: Principles, policy and practice, 5*(1), 7-74. Also summarized in "Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment," *Phi Delta Kappan, 80*(2), 139-148.

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