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Designing the Assessments

Assessments are based on the essential understandings/questions. There are three types of assessments we need to design: pre-, formative, and summative. While there is a suggested sequence to design these, we recognize how fluid this process is. In the course of designing a summative assessment, for example, we may realize we need to change the essential understandings slightly or we might think of a great learning experience that would be more effective than what we've been planning to do. As we design those essential understandings and learning experiences, on the other hand, we might think of a better way to assess students. Be open to the back-and-forth nature of unit planning.

Although we've just listed the three types of assessments in the order in which students will experience them, they are usually designed in a different order. As mentioned before, we start with where we're going—summative assessments. Design this one first, and make sure everything in the unit's objectives or understandings is accounted for in the summative assessment, and that it doesn't assess anything beyond the unit's goals. Keeping focused means we literally write out or type the culminating project or unit test before we design our first lesson with the material.

Once summative assessments are identified, we can determine our pre-assessments. They are smaller pieces and versions of the summative assessments. If the summative assessment is a complex project, of course, we cull the basics from the project and ask students to do sample tasks that reveal their readiness levels regarding mastery.

Finally, we identify frequent and plentiful formative assessments that will guide our instruction. Again, if formative assessment ideas suggest themselves while planning other portions of the unit, write them down right away.

To clarify, let's be clear on the purpose of each type of assessment.

Pre-assessments. These assessments are used to indicate students' readiness for content and skill development, and to guide instructional decisions.

Formative Assessments. These assessments are en route checkpoints, done frequently. They provide ongoing and helpful feedback, informing instruction and reflecting subsets of the essential and enduring knowledge. See the next section for more information on formative assessments.

Summative Assessments. These assessments are given to students at the end of the learning. They match objectives and experiences, and their formats are negotiable if the product is not the literal standard and would prevent students from revealing what they know about a topic. They reflect most, if not all, of the essential and enduring knowledge.

The Wisdom of Formative Assessment

Assessment is never kept exclusively for the end of a unit. On the contrary, students achieve more with frequent formative assessment throughout the unit.

After reviewing 7,827 studies on learning and instruction, researcher John Hattie . . . reported that providing students with specific information about their standing in terms of particular objectives increased their achievement by 37 percentile points. To dramatize the implications of this research, assume that two students of equal ability are in the same class learning the same content. Also assume that they take a test on the content before beginning instruction and that both receive a score that puts their knowledge of the content at the 50th percentile. Four weeks go by and the students receive exactly the same instruction, the same assignments, and so on. However, one student receives systematic feedback in terms of specific learning goals; the other does not. After four weeks, the two students take another test. Everything else being equal, the student who received the systematic feedback obtained a score that was 34 percentile points higher than the score of the student who had not received feedback. It was his dramatic finding that led Hattie to remark: "The most powerful single innovation that enhances achievement is feedback." (Marzano et al. 2001, p. 23)

Many teachers make the mistake of spending considerable energy designing a culminating project or test, but its end-of-unit nature limits impact on student learning. Students can't use the feedback they gain from such assessments to grow. A better use of energy, then, is for teachers to spend considerable time and effort designing and using formative assessments offered en route to summative achievements. These frequent checkpoints are where students learn the most. They allow teachers to change course mid-journey, and they keep students and their parents informed—positives all around.

This really is significant. If we rally our resources, creativity, and focus around students' summative experiences, we miss critical opportunities to positively affect learning. When designing a lesson or unit, the wise teacher spends time inserting ideas for formative assessments, making sure they are frequent and substantive, then finds time and inclination throughout the unit to consider those assessments and make instructional changes accordingly. It's not too much, then, for a principal or colleague to pass a teacher in the hallway or stop by his or her classroom and ask, "What's one thing you changed in the last two weeks in your instruction because of something you observed while assessing students?" Or put more directly: "What did you learn about a student today and what did you do with that knowledge?"

Figure 3.1 Topics with Sample Formative Assessments

Topic	Formative Assessments
Verb Conjugation	Conjugate five regular verbs. Conjugate five irregular verbs. Conjugate a verb in Spanish, then do its parallel in English Answer: Why do we conjugate verbs? Answer: What advice would you give a student learning to conjugate verbs? Examine the following ten verb conjugations and identify which ones are done incorrectly.
Balancing Chemical Equations	Define reactants and products, and identify them in the equations provided. Critique how Jason calculated the number of moles of each reactant. Balance these sample, unbalanced equations. Answer: What do we mean by balancing equations? Explain to your lab partner how knowledge of stoichiometric coefficients helps us balance equations. Prepare a mini-poster that explains the differences among combination, decomposition, and displacement reactions.

Formative assessment can take many formats. See Figure 3.1 for examples of topics and their sample formative assessments.

Take Action as a Result of What We Learn

Besides their critical role in diagnosing students' needs and informing teachers' decisions, assessments result in action. Many teachers do a myriad of assessments, including multiple intelligence surveys, learning style inventories, standardized state or provincial exams, interest surveys, Myers-Briggs Personality Type profiles, Bernice McCarthy's 4MAT learning styles system, and unit pre-assessments. Chapter 1, "Getting to Know Your Students," of Sheryn Spencer Northey's wonderful book, *Handbook on Differentiated Instruction for Middle and High Schools*, is one of the best sources available for these instruments.

Unfortunately, some teachers (and earlier in my career me included) do all these assessments, yet still go ahead and do what they were going to do anyway. They do not know how to differentiate nor do they have a large enough repertoire of strategies from which to choose. Instead of spending all that time coming to know their students via those assessments, they would better serve students if they just went ahead and taught without assessing. Of course it wouldn't be very good teaching, but it would be a