Integrating Learning and Assessment: The Development of an Assessment Culture

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“Good teaching is inseparable from good assessing. The question, therefore, is not whether to evaluate students, but how to measure performance in ways that will enrich learning, rather than restrict it.”

Ernest Boyer’s words suggest a culture of assessment that goes beyond mere assignment of grades on a report card or a mark at the top of the first page of a test. This philosophy depicts assessment as a tool essential for learning to occur, one that teachers and learners value rather than dread. Appropriate assessments are used to determine individual student progress rather than to compare one student’s work to that of another student. The purpose of classroom assessment is twofold: 1. to inform the teacher, individual student, and caregivers of the student’s progress toward mastery of stated objectives, and 2. to inform the teacher about effectiveness of the curriculum approach and instructional strategies used to present the objectives to the students. Without well-planned effective assessment, educators lack data to make critical decisions about teaching and learning.

In an integrated curriculum approach, assessment assumes the role of gauging students’ progress toward and effectiveness in solving real world problems, thus
assuming more widely encompassing techniques than mere paper-pencil tests allow. In order to prepare students to become life-long learners, we must also teach them to become reflective and effective self-evaluators. Because an integrated curriculum delivery assumes meaningful transferable content, student progress is regularly assessed and instruction is structured to assist students on their academic journeys. Assessments, then, ideally show the students where they are in relation to their set goals and allow them to design means to make further progress toward those goals. The setting of goals and their assessment becomes a transparent collaborative process that engages students in their own learning. That is, students and teachers describe their learning outcomes, how they will be assessed, and means of reaching their goals. The design of assessments always precedes and guides decisions regarding instruction. This philosophy assumes that the construction of assessments must be a thoughtful, deliberate, and collaborative process of planning.

Effective assessments, therefore, share these common characteristics:

1. Assessments directly align with stated goals and objectives. Teachers, students, and parents understand curriculum goals.

2. Assessments are on-going. They provide multiple snapshots of student progress toward stated goals and objectives. They are formative and summative in design. Objectives are used to determine means of assessment and assessments are used to suggest further objectives.

3. Assessments inform classroom practice. Instruction is guided by students’ academic progress and needs.
4. Assessments provide descriptive and corrective feedback. Such feedback is concrete and specifically stated.

5. Student and teacher self-assessments are a critical form of learning.

6. Assessments are varied in scope and delivery. Alternative assessments, those other than paper/pencil tests, give students with varied learning styles opportunities to show what they know and are able to do.

7. Teachers and learners use assessments as fodder for meaningful reflection.

1. Alignment of Goals, Objectives, and Assessments

Regardless of the curriculum delivery approach, educators must define the goals and objectives for any unit of study. These academic targets may be established by federal, state, or local curriculum mandates, by teacher knowledge of student academic needs, and by interests articulated by the learners themselves. The most effective integrated units blend all of the above, thus meeting specific standards while addressing the needs and interests of the learners. The goals and objectives must specify content to be learned, skills to be addressed, and habits of the mind to be nurtured. “A thoughtful assessment system does not seek correct answers only, therefore. It seeks evidence of worthy habits of mind; it seeks to expose and root out thoughtlessness – moral as well as intellectual thoughtlessness.” Goals are meaningful and relevant to the students’ lives and provide them with understandings, abilities, attitudes, and habits that can be transferred to many challenges students may encounter. These goals and objectives are well-known and understood by students and their parents. It is essential that the students realize where this academic journey will take them and why it is a worthwhile trip. If students and parents have input into the selection of objectives, instruction, and
assessment and determine relevance, they will more likely view the unit as a worthy investment of their time and attention. Integrated units, then, are not viewed as academic “fluff,” but as a means of learning important “stuff.”

Assessments are designed to determine individual student progress toward and mastery of these articulated aims. Instead of being graded on recitation of trivial pieces of information, students are actually observed performing the objectives formulated for the unit, using identified essential knowledge, and applying relevant skills. Students’ thoughtful use of the content is carefully monitored and used to show the evolution of students’ levels of thinking and working. In this way, assessment becomes authentic and students value the use of their newly acquired abilities.

2. On-going Assessments

A variety of assessments provide multiple snapshots of student progress toward stated goals and objectives. They are formative and summative in design and include pre-assessments to determine levels of skills and content prior to instruction. Benchmarks that indicate student progress are then defined and teachers and learners use assessments to gauge development throughout the unit of study. Therefore, defined objectives and their pre-assessments are used not only to determine further means of assessment, but also to suggest a sequence of appropriate objectives. Lack of student progress toward the objectives is identified early; assessments indicate areas of difficulty, and objectives and instruction are appropriately adjusted to insure student success. In such a culture, a student may show misunderstanding, but is then redirected prior to any summative evaluation. As such, individual accountability is assured. This kind of assessment culture does not rely on one individual performance as a true measure of
student learning. Rather, progress is monitored on a regular basis, not merely by written tests and quizzes, but also through observation of authentic tasks. Assessment, then, becomes part of the culture, thus minimizing students’ anxiety. Students learn to value assessment as a learning tool that will aid them in their development. This kind of culture also assumes that if the objectives are important enough to teach, then all students should learn them. Multiple assessments concretely show students their progress, thus motivating them to continue learning. Not all of these assessments will be graded A through F. Assessment is a concept different from evaluation. Evaluation involves a judgment of student work, usually stated in terms of a grade. More often, educators should employ assessment practices that are judgment-free and are designed to give students and their teacher data to indicate the direction learning must take. In effective assessment procedures, specific and concrete feedback is given so that students can see what they have learned and understand what they need to do to. Through the use of these assessment data, students come to realize that the important concept is their learning, not the grade achieved on an individual assessment.

3. Informed Classroom Practice

Instructional practice must be determined by students’ progress and academic successes. On-going assessments give teachers data necessary to guide their instruction appropriately. Instead of measuring pedagogical effectiveness on assumed criteria, teachers use data from assessments to determine the extent to which students are “getting it.” Many times, teachers will discover that a teaching strategy must be supplemented, or a lesson must be re-taught using a different approach. These data allow teachers to group and regroup the students according to their actual learning needs, to offer mini-lessons, or
to change the lesson completely. If many of the students seem not to have mastered the specific content and skills, the fault may lie with the instruction rather than with the students. In such a case, students are not penalized in their grades. Instead, instruction is readdressed and further assessments determine the degree of successful learning. Analysis of results of assessments also can give teachers information regarding students’ learning styles. This information can then lead to appropriate groupings of students for further instruction.

In the past, lesson design used took precedence over identification of assessments. While certainly the lesson design is important, it cannot be prepared effectively without prior identification of the goals to be addressed and the assessment to be used to determine level of student mastery. To put it another way, once we know where we’re going and how we’ll know if and when we get there, then we can map out our directions for the journey. Carrying this analogy, we must recognize when the trip demands a detour and a whole new route is required. That is why strategically placed assessments are critical. Effective educators do not wait until the end of a unit of study to determine students’ success; rather, they assess student progress frequently and change direction when necessary.

The information teachers analyze through these assessments enable them to articulate teaching success in terms of what the students have accomplished rather than in terms of what the teacher him/herself has done. Sometimes it will be useful for teachers to collaborate in assessment analysis in order to get more than one opinion and to increase assessment accuracy. This approach to assessment is a big step in embracing the mindset that student learning is the ultimate goal. The philosophy of this assessment
culture emphasizes that all students can and should be able to accomplish the defined tasks and that it is the teacher’s responsibility to analyze the assessment data and to design subsequent instruction so that all students will find academic success. When such a philosophy is implemented in the integrated classroom, we alter our emphasis on what teachers are doing in the classroom to what individual students are accomplishing.

4. **Self-Assessments, Descriptive and Corrective Feedback**

Feedback is essential for learning to occur – both for the student and the teacher. Students must understand explicitly how to improve and make academic progress and teachers must understand how students are faring. An aim of education is to assist students in becoming independent life-long learners. Students can not progress when they make a mistake, but are uncertain of where they went wrong. Too often, demands on teachers’ time results in stunted feedback. Comments like “awkward” or “no,” for example, do not give students enough critical information to be able to make adjustments in their thinking. The development of rubrics and specific evaluation criteria help students and teachers to pinpoint areas of learning strengths and weaknesses and to clarify student progress. Students can and should be involved in the development of these assessment criteria. In this way, students concretely learn what it means to produce quality work on an assignment.

It is good practice for teachers to do a critical analysis of tasks students are expected to perform. Steps necessary in the sequence of learning are concretely articulated so that both teachers and students can determine where student work lies in the learning continuum. Students understand where they are and what they must do in order to be successful in achieving the goals and objectives set with and for them.
5. Teacher and Student Self-Assessments

An effective assessment culture places importance on the ability to accurately self-assess. Teachers can model self-assessment practices through the use of think-alouds and examples of good work and best practice. When students learn what good work entails, they can and should practice a reflective review of their own work and learn to critique it thoughtfully. Since our goal is to foster independent learning, students can not rely merely on others’ assessments of their work. This is a particularly important criterion for work in integrated curriculum settings, because students often are pursuing tasks that are meaningful to themselves and are solving real-world problems.

Teacher modeling and instruction of self-assessment techniques should also emphasize the fact that most learning involves making mistakes. Students must internalize the idea that mistakes do not always carry a negative connotation or earn negative grades. Teachers must consistently convey this message. This is why some assessment must not carry judgment with it. Too often, students look at the grade they received, but even if the teacher provides specific feedback, either the students don’t read it or, if they do, the assignment is completed and the students lack the opportunity to employ the changes suggested by the teacher’s feedback. By analyzing their own mistakes, students learn how to correct them and use the newly acquired skills and information in future opportunities, thus truly demonstrating the mastery of required goals and objectives. Students also learn to analyze good work, including their own best examples. They gain skills in the articulation of their academic growth and can identify concrete goals for their continued learning.

6. Variation in Scope and Delivery
Alternative assessments, those other than paper/pencil tests, give students with varied learning styles opportunities to show what they know and are able to do. Since an integrated curriculum approach centers learning on solving central questions, authentic assessments become necessary. Teachers observe students in the engagement of real work. The National Middle School Associations position statement, This We Believe, advises that “ways of assessing and evaluating students’ growth must address the many other aspects of a student’s development including critical thinking, independence, responsibility, and those other desired personal attributes and dispositions that have lifelong influence. This requires a variety of assessment strategies including journals, electronic portfolios, demonstrations, peer feedback, teacher-designed tests, and audio or video evidences of learning.”

Because the integrated curriculum involves the exploration of real world problems that engage the learner and use the various subject matters, assessment strategies must be just as engaging and varied as the instruction.

7. Meaningful Reflection

Integrated curriculum and assessments encourage a culture where critical thinking and reflection are paramount. Students need time and opportunities to think about their work realistically and mark their progress not only in curriculum content, but also in such important skills as developing a positive work ethic, collaborating effectively, making thoughtful decisions, and demonstrating responsibility. After a pre-assessment is given and analyzed, students should set goals concerning curriculum and habits of mind. They and their teacher(s) can then periodically conference regarding accomplishments, successes, areas of strength and weakness. Students should get into the habit of analyzing their own work and resetting goals as they progress.
Portfolio presentations are a valuable way to encourage students to summarize their efforts and share their accomplishments with a wider audience. Students need to get into the habit of sharing their work with others besides the teacher. At the conclusion of a unit of study students could be encouraged to reflect on their work and create a way of demonstrating it. Electronic portfolios and video-taping are efficient ways of storing self-assessments for continued reflection about one’s growth.

Student-led conferences are an effective forum for students to practice the articulation of their growth and needs. Students should be able to show teachers and caregivers what they have accomplished and what they have planned for future endeavors. Such a format for reporting student growth emphasizes progress and areas of challenge free from judgment, as opposed to a teacher conference focusing on a discussion of an A – F graded report card. In this way, learning takes center stage as opposed to grades, which are an indication of someone else’s opinions of one’s work. The point is that assessments should help students to be self-reliant and become independent learners.

**In Conclusion**

Assessment is a powerful learning tool when it is used with an integrated curriculum that emphasizes individual student accomplishment and high-level student reflection. A culture of authentic assessment used with authentic curriculum delivery encourages students to take academic risks, to analyze their own strengths and weaknesses, and to identify means of optimizing their own learning. In addition, this philosophy of assessment helps teachers to prepare educational opportunities that individual students can value.
With our knowledge base expanding so rapidly, our challenge is to provide
students with means of solving real problems, of asking important questions, of
appropriately evaluating their own achievements, and helping to prepare a generation of
life-long learners.

Notes

1. Ernest L. Boyer, The Basic School: A Community for Learning (New York: The
Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1995), 104.


4. Grant P. Wiggins, Assessing Student Performance: Exploring the Purpose and

5. National Middle School Association, This We Believe: Successful Schools for
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