

PART 1

Keys to Classroom Assessment Quality

Part I provides your introductory orientation to sound classroom assessment practice. Chapter 1 introduces a brief series of universal keys to quality assessment, centering on the critical roles of accurate assessment and emphasizing the power and thus the importance of student involvement in the process. Chapter 2 centers on instructional decision making by identifying the users and uses of assessment information (that is, the decision makers) from the classroom to the school building to the district and beyond. Chapter 3 describes the various kinds of achievement, contending that we can dependably assess only those learning targets that we have clearly and appropriately defined. We will map the route to student success in mastering state or local achievement standards by breaking each standard down into the classroom-level achievement targets that underpin mastery and by transforming those targets into student-friendly versions to be shared with our students from the very beginning of their learning. Chapter 4 frames commonsense standards of classroom assessment quality, explaining how to select proper assessment methods given particular users and achievement targets. This chapter connects these various assessment methods to the various kinds of achievement discussed in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 1

Classroom Assessment for Student Success

CHAPTER FOCUS

This chapter answers the following guiding question:

What are my classroom assessment responsibilities as a teacher and how can I fulfill them?

From your study of this chapter, you will understand the following:

1. How classroom assessment fits into the big picture of your job as a teacher and as part of the team in your school and district.
2. What it means to develop and use assessments that dependably reflect important learning targets.
3. The relationships among assessment, student confidence, and student success at learning.
4. Guiding principles or keys to quality that underpin sound classroom assessment practice.

A Teacher's Classroom Assessment Responsibilities

Assessment is, in part, the process of gathering evidence of student learning to inform instructional decisions. This process can be done well or poorly. To promote student success we all must be able to do it well. That means we must do both of the following:

- Gather *accurate evidence* of the achievement of our students—the quality and impact of our instructional decisions depend on it.
- Weave the classroom assessment process and its results into instruction in ways that *benefit students*; that is, that enhance both their desire to learn and their achievement.

Gather dependable information and use it well and we can get our students on winning streaks and keep them there. In short, we succeed as teachers by promoting their success. Gather inaccurate information or use it poorly and we can do severe and perhaps long-lasting damage to some (perhaps many) of our students. Let me introduce you to Ms. Weathersby, a teacher who has mastered her classroom assessment responsibilities and who carries them out very effectively. She and her student, Emily, can teach us valuable lessons.

A STORY OF ASSESSMENT FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

At a local school board meeting, the English department faculty from the high school presents the results of their evaluation of the new writing instruction program that they had implemented over the past year. The audience includes a young woman named Emily, a junior at the local high school, sitting in the back of the room with her parents. She knows she will be a big part of the presentation. It has been a good year for her. It was unlike any she has ever experienced in school before. She also knows her parents and teacher are as proud of her as she is of herself.

In preparation for their new program, the faculty attended a summer institute on integrating their writing assessments into their teaching and their students' learning. The teachers were confident that this professional development and their subsequent program revisions would produce much higher levels of writing proficiency.

As the first step in presenting program evaluation results, the English department chair, Ms. Weathersby, who also happens to be Emily's English teacher, distributes a sample of student writing to the board members (with the student's name removed), asking them to read and evaluate this writing. Here is that work:

BEGINNING OF THE YEAR Writing Sample

Computers are a thing of the future. They help us in thousands of ways. Computers are a help to our lives. They make things easier. They help us to keep track of information.

Computers are simple to use. Anyone can learn how. You do not have to be a computer expert to operate a computer. You just need to know a few basic things.

Computers can be robots that will change our lives. Robots are really computers! Robots do a lot of the work that humans used to do. This makes our lives much easier. Robots build cars and do many other tasks that humans used to do. When robots learn to do more, they will take over most of our work. This will free humans to do other kinds of things. You can also communicate on computers. It is much faster than mail! You can look up information, too. You can find information on anything at all on a computer.

Computers are changing the work and changing the way we work and communicate. In many ways, computers are changing our lives and making our lives better and easier.*

*Source: Personal writing by Nikki Spandel. Reprinted with permission.

They are critical in their commentary. One board member reports that, if these represent the best results of that new writing program, then clearly it is not having the impact they had hoped for. The board member is right. This is, in fact, a pretty weak piece of work. Emily's mom puts her arm around her daughter's shoulder and hugs her.

But Ms. Weathersby urges patience and asks the board members to be very specific in stating what they don't like about this work. As the board registers its opinion, a faculty member records the criticisms on chart paper for all to see. The list includes repetitiveness, no organization, short, choppy sentences, and disconnected ideas.

Next, Ms. Weathersby distributes another sample of student writing, asking the board to read and evaluate it.

END OF THE YEAR Writing Sample

So there I was, my face aglow with the reflection on my computer screen, trying to come up with the next line for my essay. Writing it was akin to Chinese water torture, as I could never seem to end it. It dragged on and on, a never-ending babble of stuff.

Suddenly, unexpectedly—I felt an ending coming on. I could wrap this thing up in four or five sentences, and this dreadful assignment would be over. I'd be free.

I had not saved yet, and decided I would do so now. I clasped the slick, white mouse in my hand, slid it over the mouse pad, and watched as the black arrow progressed toward the "File" menu. By accident, I clicked the mouse button just to the left of paragraph 66. I saw a flash and the next thing I knew, I was back to square one. I stared at the blank screen for a moment in disbelief. Where was my essay? My ten-billion-page masterpiece? Gone?! No—that couldn't be! Not after all the work I had done! Would a computer be that unforgiving? That unfeeling? Didn't it care about me at all?

I decided not to give up hope just yet. The secret was to remain calm. After all, my file had to be somewhere—right? That's what all the manuals say—"It's in there *somewhere*." I went back to the "File" menu, much more carefully this time. First, I tried a friendly sounding category called "Find File." No luck there; I hadn't given the file a name.

Ah, then I had a brainstorm. I could simply go up to "Undo." Yes, that would be my savior! A simple click of a button and my problem would be solved! I went to Undo, but it looked a bit fuzzy. Not a good sign. That means there is nothing to undo. Don't panic ... don't panic ...

I decided to try to exit the program, not really knowing what I would accomplish by this but feeling more than a little desperate. Next, I clicked on the icon that would allow me back in to word processing. A small sign appeared, telling me that my program was being used by another user. Another user? What's it talking about? *I'm* the only user, you idiot! Or at least I'm trying to be a user! Give me my paper back! Right now!

I clicked on the icon again and again—to no avail. Click ... click ... clickclickclickCLICKCLICKCLICK!!!! Without warning, a thin cloud of smoke began to rise from the back of the computer. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Sighing, I opened my desk drawer, and pulled out a tablet and pen. It was going to be a long day.*

*Source: Personal writing by Nikki Spandel. Reprinted with permission.

Ah, now this, they report, is more like it! But be specific, she demands. What do you like about this work? They list positive aspects: good choice of words, sound sentence structure, clever ideas, and so on. Emily is ready to burst! She squeezes her mom's hand.

The reason she's so full of pride at this moment is that this has been a special year for her and her classmates. For the first time ever, they became partners with their English teachers in managing their own improvement as writers. Early in the year, Ms. Weathersby made it crystal clear to Emily that she was, in fact, not a very good writer and that just trying hard to get better was not going to be enough. She expected Emily to improve—nothing else would suffice.

Ms. W. started the year by working with students to implement new state writing standards, including understanding quality performance in word choice, sentence structure, organization, and voice, and by sharing some new "analytical scoring guides" written just for students. Each scoring guide explained the differences between good and poor-quality writing in understandable terms. When Emily and her teacher evaluated her first two pieces of writing using these standards, she received very low ratings. Not very good. . . .

But Ms. W. also provided samples of writing that Emily could see were very good. Slowly, Emily began to understand why they were very good. The differences between these and her work started to become clear. Ms. W. began to share examples and strategies that would help her writing improve one step at a time. As she practiced and time passed, Emily and her classmates kept samples of their old writing to compare to their new writing, and they began to build their “growth” portfolios. Thus, she literally began to watch her own writing skills improve before her very eyes. At midyear, her parents were invited in for a conference at which Emily, not Ms. Weathersby, shared the contents of her growing writing portfolio and described her emerging writing skills. Emily remembers sharing thoughts about some aspects of her writing that had become very strong and some examples of things she still needed to work on. Now, the year was at an end and here she sat waiting for her turn to speak to the school board about all of this.

Now, having set up board members by having them analyze, evaluate, and compare these two samples of student work, Ms. W. springs a surprise. The two pieces of writing they had just evaluated, one of relatively poor quality and one of outstanding quality, were produced by the same writer at the beginning and at the end of the school year! This, she reports, is evidence of the kind of impact the new writing program is having on student writing proficiency.

Needless to say, all are impressed. However, one board member wonders aloud, “Have all your students improved in this way?” Having anticipated the question, the rest of the English faculty joins the presentation and produces carefully prepared charts depicting dramatic changes in typical student performance over time on rating scales for each of six clearly articulated dimensions of good writing. They accompany their description of student performance on each scale with actual samples of student work illustrating various levels of proficiency.

Further, Ms. W. informs the board that the student whose improvement has been so dramatically illustrated with the work they have just analyzed is present at this meeting, along with her parents. This student is ready to talk with the board about the nature of her learning experience. Emily, you’re on! Interest among the board members runs high. Emily talks about how she has come to understand the truly important differences between good and bad writing. She refers to differences she had not understood before, how she has learned to assess her own writing and to fix it when it doesn’t “work well,” and how she and her classmates have learned to talk with her teacher and one another about what it means to write well. Ms. W. talks about the improved focus of writing instruction, increase in student motivation, and important positive changes in the very nature of the student–teacher relationship.

This board member turns to Emily’s parents and asks their impression of all of this. They report with pride that they had never before seen so much evidence of Emily’s achievement and that most of it came from Emily herself. Emily had never been called on to lead the parent-teacher conference before. They had no idea she was so articulate. They loved it. Their daughter’s pride in and accountability for her achievement had skyrocketed in the past year.

As the meeting ends, it is clear to all in attendance this evening that this application of student-involved classroom assessment has contributed to important learning. The English faculty accepted responsibility for student learning, shared that responsibility with their students, and everybody won. There are good feelings all around. One of the accountability demands of the community was satisfied with the presentation of credible evidence of student success, and the new writing program was the reason for improved student achievement. Obviously, this story has a happy ending.

Success from the Student's Point of View

The day after the board meeting, an interview with Emily about the evening's events revealed even more about what really works for Emily.

"You did a nice job at the school board meeting last night, Emily," I started.

"Thanks," she replied. "What's most exciting for me is that, last year, I could never have done it."

"What's changed from last year?"

"I guess I'm more confident. I knew what had happened for me in English class and I wanted to tell them my story."

"You became a confident writer."

"Yeah, but that's not what I mean. Last night at the board meeting I was more than a good writer. I felt confident talking about my writing and how I'd improved."

"Let's talk about Emily the confident writer. What were you thinking last night when the board members were reacting to your initial writing sample—you know, the one that wasn't very good? Still confident?"

"Mom helped. She squeezed my hand and I remember she whispered in my ear, 'You'll show 'em!' That helped me handle it. It's funny, I was listening to the board members' comments to see if they knew anything about good writing. I wondered if they understood as much about it as I do—like, maybe they needed to take Ms. Weathersby's class."

"How did they do?" I asked, laughing.

"Pretty well, actually," Em replied. "They found some problems in my early work and described them pretty well. When I first started last fall, I wouldn't have been able to do that. I was a terrible writer."

"How do you know that, Em?"

"I understand where I was then, how little I could do. No organization. I didn't even know my own voice. No one had ever taken the time to show me the secrets. I'd never learned to analyze my writing. I wouldn't have known what to look for or how to describe it or how to change it. That's part of what Ms. W. taught us."

"How did she do that?"

"To begin with, she taught us to do what the board members did last night: analyze other people's writing. We looked at newspaper editorials, passages from books we were reading, letters friends had sent us. She wanted us to see what made those pieces work or not work. She would read a piece to us and then we'd brainstorm what made it good or bad. Pretty soon, we began to see patterns—things that worked or didn't work. She wanted us to begin to see and hear stuff as she read out loud."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Well, look, here's my early piece from the meeting last night. See, just read it!"

(Refer back to the "Beginning of the Year Sample" above, if you wish.)

"See, there are no grammar or usage mistakes. So it's 'correct' in that sense. But these short, choppy sentences just don't work. And it doesn't say anything or go anywhere. It's just a bunch of disconnected thoughts. It doesn't grab you and hold your attention. Then it stops. It just ends. Now look at my second piece to see the difference."

(Refer back to "End of the Year Sample," if you wish.)

"In this one, I tried to tell about the feelings of frustration that happen when humans use machines. See, I think the voice in this piece comes from the feeling that 'We've all been there.' Everyone who works with computers has had this experience. A writer's tiny problem (not being able to find a good ending) turns into a major problem (losing the

whole document). This idea makes the piece clear and organized. I think the reader can picture this poor, frustrated writer at her computer, wanting, trying to communicate in a human way—but finding that the computer is just as frustrated with her!”

“You sound just like you did last night at the board meeting.”

“I’m always like this about my writing now. I know what works. Sentences are important. So is voice. So are organization and word choice—all that stuff. If you do it right, it works and you know it,” she replied with a smile.

“What kinds of things did Ms. W. do in class that worked for you?”

“Well, like, when we were first getting started, Ms. Weathersby gave us a big stack of student papers she’d collected over the years—some good, some bad, and everything in between. Our assignment was to sort them into four stacks based on quality, from real good to real bad. When we were done, we compared who put what papers in which piles and then we talked about why. Sometimes, the discussions got pretty heated! Ms. W. wanted us to describe what we thought were the differences among the piles. Over time, we formed those differences into a set of rating scales that we used to analyze, evaluate, and improve our writing.”

“Did you evaluate your own work or each other’s?”

“Only our own stuff to begin with. Ms. W. said she didn’t want anyone being embarrassed. We all had a lot to learn. It was supposed to be private until we began to trust our own judgments. She kept saying, ‘Trust me. You’ll get better at this and then you can share.’”

“Did you ever move on to evaluating one another’s work?”

“Yeah. After a while, we began to trust ourselves and each other. Then we were free to ask classmates for opinions. But Ms. W. said, no blanket judgments—no saying just this is good or bad. And we were always supposed to be honest. If we couldn’t see how to help someone improve a piece, we were supposed to say so.”

“Were you able to see improvement in your writing along the way?”

“Yeah, see, Ms. W. said that was the whole idea. I’ve still got my writing portfolio full of practice, see? It starts out pretty bad back in the fall and slowly gets pretty good toward spring. This is where the two pieces came from that the board read last night. I picked them. I talk about the changes in my writing in the self-reflections in here. My portfolio tells the whole story. Want to look through it?”

“I sure do. What do you think Ms. Weathersby did that was right, Emily?”

“Nobody had ever been so clear with me before about what it took to be really good at school stuff. It’s like, there’s no mystery—no need to psych her out. She said, ‘I won’t ever surprise you, trust me. I’ll show you what I want and I don’t want any excuses. But you’ve got to deliver good writing in this class. You don’t deliver, you don’t succeed.’”

“Every so often, she would give us something she had written, so we could rate and provide her with feedback on her work. She listened to our comments and said it really helped her improve her writing. All of a sudden, *we* became *her* teachers! That was so cool!”

“You know, she was the first teacher ever to tell me that it was okay not to be very good at something at first, like, when you’re trying to do something new. But we couldn’t stay there. We had to get a little better each time. If we didn’t, it was our own fault. She didn’t want us to give up on ourselves. If we kept improving, over time, we could learn to write well. I wish every teacher would do that. She would say, ‘There’s no shortage of success around here. You learn to write well, you get an A. My goal is to have everyone learn to write well and deserve an A.’”

“Thanks for filling in the details, Em.”

“Thank you for asking!”

The Keys to Success

Let's consider the conditions that needed to be in place in Ms. W.'s classroom for Emily and her classmates to have experienced such success. To begin with, Ms. W. was intent on using the classroom assessment process and its results to help her students become better writers. Therefore, assessment was a student-involved activity *during the learning*; that is, Emily and her classmates assessed their own achievement repeatedly over time, so they could watch their own improvement. Ms. W. shared with her students the wisdom and power that come from being able to assess the quality of one's own writing and fix it when it isn't working. She showed her students the secrets to their own success. So, in this sense, her assessment *purpose* during the learning was crystal clear.

Second, Ms. Weathersby started with a highly refined vision of the *learning target*. She conveyed this to her students by engaging them in the study with her of samples of writing that varied greatly in quality. From this, she drew them into creating written descriptions of the levels of writing quality, each reflecting one key attribute of the learning target. With these learning progressions in place, she was able to help her students remain in touch with their current level place on the learning continuum. She wanted her students to continually see the distance closing between their present position and their goal. She used ongoing student-involved assessment, not for entries in the grade book, but as a confidence-building motivator and teaching tool. The grading part came later—after the learning. This turned out to be incredibly empowering for her students.

Third, Ms. W. and her colleagues knew that their *assessments* of student achievement had to be very accurate. Writing exercises had to elicit the right kinds of writing. Scoring criteria and procedures needed to focus on the facets of writing that make it effective. As faculty members, they needed to train themselves to apply those scoring standards dependably—to avoid making biased judgments about the quality of student work.

But just as importantly from a classroom assessment point of view, Ms. W. understood that she also had to train her students to make dependable judgments about the quality of their own work. *This represents the heart of competence. She understood that any student who cannot evaluate the quality of her own writing and fix it when it isn't working cannot become an independent, lifelong writer.* Her job is to bring her students to a place where they didn't need her any longer to tell them they had produced good writing—to a place where they could determine that on their own and act on their own self-assessment results if their writing was there yet.

Finally, Ms. W. needed to take great care throughout to *communicate effectively* about student achievement. Whether describing for Emily improvements needed or achieved in her work or sharing with the school board summary information about typical student gains in writing proficiency, she took pains to speak simply, using shared vocabulary and relying on examples to ensure that her meaning was clear.

Some Students Aren't So Lucky

Sadly, for every such positive story in which sound assessment feeds into productive instruction and important learning, there may be another story with a far less constructive, perhaps even painful, ending. For example, consider the story of Rick's daughter Kristen Ann, when she was just beginning to learn to write:

Krissy arrived home from third grade one afternoon full of gloom. She said she knew we were going to be angry with her. She presented us with a sheet of paper—the third-grade size with the wide lines. On it, she had written a story. Her assignment was to write about someone or something she cares about deeply. She wrote of Kelly, an adorable tiny kitten who had come to be part of our family, but who had to return to the farm after two weeks because of allergies. Kelly's departure had been a painful loss of a very real family member.

On the sheet of paper was an emergent writer's version of this story—not sophisticated, but poignant. Krissy's recounting of events was accurate and her story captured her very strong sadness and disappointment at losing her new little friend. Actually, she did a pretty darn good job of writing, for a beginner. At the bottom of the page, which filled about three quarters of the page, was a big red circled "F". We asked her why, and she told us that the teacher said she had better learn to follow directions or she would continue to fail. Questioning further, we found that her teacher had said that students were to fill the page with writing. Krissy had not done that, so she hadn't followed directions and deserved an F.

When she had finished telling us this story, Kris put the sheet of paper down on the kitchen table and, with a very discouraged look, said in an intimidated voice, "I'll never be a good writer anyway," and left the room. My recollection of that moment remains vivid after 30 years.

In fact, she had *succeeded* at hitting the learning target at some level. She produced some pretty good writing. But her confidence in herself as a writer was deeply shaken because her teacher failed to disentangle her expectation that students comply with directions with her expectation that they demonstrate the ability to write well. Let's analyze this in a bit more detail.

In this case, the purpose of the assessment turned out to be one of controlling student behavior, not advancing academic achievement. Kris didn't know that. The learning target the teacher was assessing was length of writing, not quality. Kris didn't know that. The evaluation criterion was "fill the page," not attributes of effective writing. As a result, both the assessment and the feedback had a destructive impact on this naïve student. Without question, it's quite easy to see if the page is full. But is that the point? It's somewhat more challenging to assess accurately and to formulate and deliver understandable and timely feedback that permits a student to write better the next time and to remain confident about her ability to continue to grow as a writer.

In sum, the purpose was not clear, the learning target was not clear, and the assessment was of inferior quality because the target and its performance criteria had no educational value; as a result, the feedback delivered confused and disappointed the learner. So the bottom line impact of the assessment experience from the learner's point of view was destructive.

Do not *ever* underestimate the power of your evaluations of student performance and the impact of your feedback on your students' (1) learning success and (2) sense of control over their own academic well-being in school. For us as adults, the result of assessing may merely be a grade that goes in a gradebook or a score we average with other scores. But for students, it's always far more personal than that. Their interpretation of the feedback we provide helps them decide how (or if!) they fit into the world of people who do these things called "writing," or "reading" or "math problem solving." And depending on how they "come down" on this, we may or may not be able to influence their learning lives. Never lose sight of this very personal dimension of your classroom assessment processes.

Time for Reflection

Analyze and compare the assessments experienced by Emily and Kristen. Considering the keys to success discussed here, what were the essential differences? Where were assessment purposes and learning targets clear? Unclear? Appropriate? Inappropriate?

Other Potential Problems

Some unfortunate students may be mired in classrooms in which they are left on their own to guess the meaning of academic success. Their teachers may lack a vision of success, focus on an incorrect one, or intentionally choose to keep the secrets of success a mystery to retain power and control in the classroom. When their students guess at the valued target and guess wrong, they fail. Under these circumstances, they fail not from lack of motivation, but from lack of insight as to what they are supposed to achieve. This can be very discouraging. It destroys confidence. Besides, it can be very unfair. These students may well have succeeded had they been given the opportunity to strive for a clear objective.

Consider the plight of those students who prepare well, master the required material, but fail anyway because the teacher prepares a poor-quality test, thus inaccurately measuring their achievement. Or how about students whose achievement is mismeasured because a teacher places blind faith in the quality of the tests that accompanied the textbook, when in fact that confidence is misplaced. Indeed, some students fail, not because of low achievement, but because their teacher's subjective judgments are riddled with the effects of bias.

When these and other such problems arise, an environment of assessment illiteracy dominates, assessments are of poor quality, and students are placed directly in harm's way.

ANTICIPATING AND AVOIDING ASSESSMENT PROBLEMS

Your job is to avoid problems like these by applying the basic principles of sound assessment. As you will see, assessments can serve many masters, take many different forms, reflect many different kinds of achievement, and fall prey to any of a variety of problems that may lead to inaccurate results. When our journey together through the chapters of this book is complete you will have developed your own framework for understanding all of the options and for selecting from among them for each classroom assessment context. You need to understand what can go wrong and how to prevent assessment problems. In short, you will be prepared to assemble the parts of the classroom assessment puzzle as artfully as Ms. Weathersby does.

We Need “Valid” Assessments

One way to think about the quality of an assessment is in terms of the fidelity of the results it produces. Just as we want our recorded music or high-definition TV to provide a high-quality representation of the real thing, so too do we want assessments to provide a high-fidelity representation of the desired learning. In the assessment

realm, this is referred to as the *validity* of the test. All assessment results (scores, for example) provide outward indications of inner mental states of the learner. We must always seek assessment results that accurately represent student learning. If they are to master content knowledge, then assessments must sample the content to be mastered. Whether assessing reasoning proficiency, performance skills, or ability to create products that meet certain standards of quality, our assessment exercises and scoring schemes must accurately reflect the learning. Such assessments are said to yield valid inferences about student mastery. We will discuss this in many ways as we study together.

Another way to think about the validity of an assessment is in terms of the usefulness of its results. A valid assessment is said to serve the purpose for which it is intended. For instance, a diagnostic test helps the user see and understand specific student needs. A college admission test leads to appropriate selection decisions among candidates. We always seek to develop and use assessments that fit the context at hand—that are valid for a specific purpose or set of purposes. Again, as we go, we will fill in details about this important concept of validity.

We Need “Reliable” Assessments

Still another way to think about assessment quality is in terms of its ability to give us consistent results. Assume that, in the truth of the world, a student possesses a specific and stable level of proficiency in reading comprehension. So we know that achievement in this case is not changing. A dependable or *reliable* assessment will reflect that stable level of achievement (a consistent score) no matter how many times we administer it.

Additionally, as that proficiency improves, a reliable assessment will track those changes in proficiency with changing results. We need to be able to count on our assessments to deliver dependable information about that student’s evolving proficiency.

As we progress, you will come to see that factors other than students’ actual level of achievement can influence test scores—bad test items, test anxiety, distractions during testing, and the like. When this happens the score is muddled by these extraneous factors and is said to have given us *unreliable* results. This is a bad thing and we will discuss how to anticipate and avoid these kinds of problems.

Assessment FOR Learning: GPS for Student Success

Here’s a very practical way to think about quality assessment: think of it as an orienting and tracking system for student learning success. These days, global positioning systems (GPS) are wired into our cars, boats, airplanes, and so on. The satellites help us keep ourselves located so we don’t get lost on the streets, on the water, or in the air—so we can track our progress and arrive safely. Think about how they work. We enter our current location and a destination. Then the information wired into the GPS system of maps determines our best route. We travel that path with the GPS screen and its friendly voice (or, in planes, air traffic controllers) keeping us posted on our progress. If we deviate, the system knows it and redirects us. We arrive safe and sound.

Assessment FOR learning is a GPS for student learning. The teacher is the satellite, in effect, loading the system with the student’s current location, destination, and

route in the form of points along the way. In an assessment FOR learning classroom, all of this is given to the student traveler who then relies on classroom assessments to know where they are at the start, track themselves as they travel toward academic success, and understand when they have arrived. If the student gets off course, the teacher (air traffic controller) knows it and redirects the learner. But in addition, students get to self-assess and see the preset way points pass by as they go, becoming partners in redirecting their own efforts if necessary. Clearly, this represents preparation for lifelong learning.

THE CHANGING MISSION OF SCHOOLS AND ROLE OF ASSESSMENT

For a variety of good and important reasons, recently, our society has expanded the social mission of its schools. This new assignment necessitates rethinking the role of assessment.

For decades, the mission of schools has been to weed out the unable and unwilling learners (we call them our “dropouts”) and to rank those who remain at the end of high school from the highest to lowest achiever. Thus, our schools served the social mission of beginning to sort us into the various segments of our social and economic system.

Recently, however, society has come to realize the insufficiency of this mission for schools in today’s increasingly complex and rapidly changing world. Because of the accelerating technical evolution, rapid expansion of our ethnic diversity, and ever-increasing international interconnectedness, society has realized that all students must master lifelong learner proficiencies. These include the reading, writing, and mathematics problem-solving capabilities needed to survive in and contribute to our collective prosperity. So society has decided that schools that merely sort no longer meet our needs. Rather, in addition to sorting, schools need to assure universal lifelong learner competence. The problem with the traditional sorting mission is that those who finish low in the rank order (along with those who give up in hopelessness and drop out before they are ever ranked) fail to master the fundamental reading, writing, math problem-solving, and other proficiencies needed to survive in and contribute to an increasingly demanding and technical society.

This new vision of effective schools has continued to evolve over the decades, leading to today’s dominant view that truly effective schools help all students meet the more rigorous academic achievement standards that prepare them for success in college and the workplace.

In response, virtually every state has developed its own standards defining the important academic learning that students are expected to master. Beyond this, at the time of this writing, new common core achievement standards are being developed for national dissemination. Once articulated by experts in each academic field, these standards are to be adopted by states, translated into state assessments, and used as a measure of the effectiveness of schools. Thus, policy makers have decreed that schools will be judged effective not merely in terms of their ability to rank students, but also on their ability to produce competent students in these terms.

Given this shift in mission assessments are going to have to do far more than merely serve as the basis for grading and ranking students. Failure to master essential achievement standards can no longer be dismissed as the student’s

problem—now it becomes the faculty's problem too. Our assessments have to help us accurately diagnose student needs, track and enhance student growth toward standards, motivate students to strive for academic excellence, and verify student mastery of required standards. This book will help you understand how classroom assessment can help us accomplish these things at whatever level and in whatever subject(s) you teach.

To be more specific, as a teacher, your job is to gather solid information about student achievement and feed it into instructional decision making. You can do this only when you are able to do the following:

- *Anticipate the information needs* of those instructional decision makers who will use your assessment results. Your assessments must be designed specifically to meet those needs.
- *Identify the achievement targets* (goals, objectives, expectations, standards) that you expect your students to hit. These must be the focus of your assessment exercises and scoring procedures.
- *Select proper assessment methods* that accurately reflect your achievement expectations.
- *Design and build high-quality assessments* that can lead you to confident conclusions about student achievement.
- *Communicate assessment results* in a timely and understandable manner into the hands of their intended user(s).

Exploring the Cultural Context of Assessment

Do you believe that everyone is supportive of this shift in the social mission of schools from one of sorting students to one of ensuring some level of universal competence for all? Who is likely to be supportive? Opposed? What would be the implications of each position for the future of assessment practice?

Important Benefits to You

There are three specific reasons why it is in your best interest to understand the principles of sound classroom assessment. First, remember that you will spend a great deal of your available professional time involved in assessment-related activities. This includes designing and building them, selecting them from other sources, administering them, scoring them, and managing and reporting results. It is hard work and can be tedious. The procedures described herein can *make that job MUCH easier*. The time savings detailed in the chapters that follow are legion.

Second, the routine application of the principles of sound classroom assessment offered herein, under the proper circumstances can *yield remarkable gains in student achievement* versus environments where they are missing (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). These gains accrue for all students, but especially for low achievers. In other words, the consistent application of these ideas can help you reduce achievement gaps between those who do and do not meet standards.

Third, understanding the elements of sound classroom assessment will allow you to build a strong defense for their use in your classroom. The ideas presented herein run counter to decades of assessment traditions in schools. As a result, you will

work with colleagues of long experience who will challenge you on them and try to draw you back into “conventional” practice. If you master the principles of sound practice, you will be able to carry them out and help others understand why they should do the same.

A FUNDAMENTAL ASSESSMENT BELIEF

Our assessment traditions are built on the belief that assessment results inform the instructional decisions made by the adults who manage schools and classrooms (teachers, principals, curriculum directors, superintendents, etc.). If the adults have the right data, we have assumed, they will make the right instructional decisions and schools will work effectively. However, in this book we manifest a fundamentally different belief. While we too believe the adults in the system play crucial roles and certainly must rely on good evidence to make instructional decisions that contribute to student success, in fact, other players make even more important instructional decisions based on assessment results. Those other assessment users, as we’re sure you have inferred by now, are students themselves. We will consider the various assessment users—adults and students—and the decisions they make in great detail in Chapter 2.

But for now, we simply ask that you put your students on your radar screen as players in the assessment process, and not merely as recipients of the scores and grades you assign. Based on their interpretation of their own academic record, students decide whether (1) they are even capable of learning what you ask them to learn, (2) trying to learn is worth the reward of public success or risk of possible public failure, and (3) the learning to be gained is worth the effort needed to acquire it. If they come down on the wrong side of these decisions in your classroom, then it doesn’t matter what you decide to try to impact their learning. The learning stops.

Therefore, whatever else we do, we must help them believe that success in learning is within reach. Student-involved classroom assessment, as described herein, is entirely about building and maintaining that confidence.

To make their decisions well, students need continuous access to accurate and understandable descriptions of their work and how to improve it. They need to know their achievement status and see their academic improvement. When they are partners in this process and have continuous access to descriptive (not judgmental) feedback during their learning, teachers tell us, it’s almost shocking how fast they can grow. The purpose of this book is to enable you to join the ranks of these very strong teachers.

This book details the different ways you can use day-to-day classroom assessment, record keeping, and communication to help learners feel in control of control their own success. It’s about avoiding circumstances in which assessments have the effect of destroying student confidence. This book aspires to assessment without victims.

We are not opposed to holding students accountable for their learning. Indeed, they need to know that, at some point in the future their work will be evaluated and will be judged sufficient or insufficient—that grades may be assigned. But in between those graded events there needs to be time for practice, time for learning. Next, we consider why.

THE EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS OF ASSESSMENT

So our aspiration is to keep students feeling in control of their own learning success. We want them confident that they probably will succeed if they try and that trying will enhance that probability. We want to promote hope and help our students see the relevance of practice—we don't want them giving up in hopelessness or seeing assignments as just a meaningless assignment. We want (indeed need) to promote student buy-in to the learning.

The label psychologists have coined for this emotional state is *self-efficacy*. As with other psychological characteristics, we each fall somewhere on a continuum from, in this case, strong to weak self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) maps the anchor points of this particular continuum as follows. While he refers to a generalized personality trait here, as educators, we can think about and refer more specifically to academic self-efficacy—a student's sense of control of her or his chances of academic success:

Self-efficacy is defined as peoples' beliefs in their own capabilities. . . . People with high assurance in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided. Such an efficacious outlook fosters intrinsic interest and deep engrossment in activities. They set themselves challenging goals and maintain strong commitment to them. They heighten and sustain their efforts in the face of failure. They quickly recover their sense of efficacy after setbacks. They attribute failure to insufficient effort or deficient knowledge and skills which [they believe] are acquirable. . . .

In contrast, people who doubt their capabilities shy away from difficult tasks which they view as personal threats. They have low aspirations and weak commitment to the goals they choose to pursue. When faced with difficult tasks, they dwell on their personal deficiencies, on the obstacles they will encounter, and all kinds of adverse outcomes rather than concentrate on how to perform successfully. They slacken their efforts and give up quickly in the face of difficulties. They are slow to recover their sense of efficacy following failure or setbacks. Because they view insufficient performance as deficient aptitude, it does not require much failure for them to lose faith in their capabilities. (p. 71)*

When our students are partners with us in assessment during learning (that is, traveling the GPS route) we help them link their efforts directly to success early and often. In effect, this encourages them to take the risk of trying and invest the energy needed to move boldly toward the strong end of this continuum. We can help them get on winning streaks and stay there as they gain confidence in themselves as learners. This emotional dynamic can feed on itself, leading students into learning trajectories where optimism overpowers pessimism, effort replaces fatigue, and success leaves failure in its wake. We will return to this concept of self-efficacy often in subsequent chapters, as it represents the emotional foundation and reason for the power of assessment FOR learning.

As you will learn in the next chapter, there are many important assessment users at all levels of the educational system. However, students, who use the results to set expectations of themselves, are among the most important. Students decide how high to aim based on their sense of the probability that they will succeed. They estimate the probability of future success based on their record of past success as reflected in their classroom assessment experience. *No single decision or combination of decisions made by any other party exerts such influence on student success.* For this reason, to be considered valid for this context, your classroom assessments must help both you and your students clearly understand the results of each individual assessment and track increments in their achievement over time.

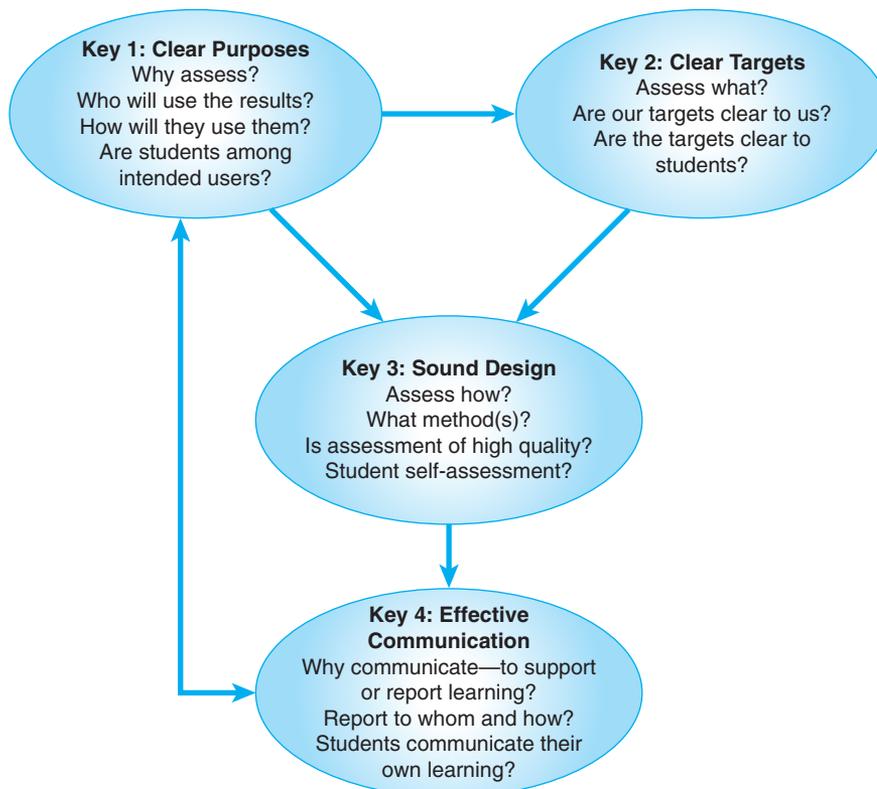
*Bandura, A. (1994). Self-efficacy. In V. S. Ramachaudran (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of human behavior* (Vol. 4, pp. 71-81). New York: Academic Press. Reprinted with permission by Elsevier.

A Special Note about Struggling Learners

When students are academically challenged, we and they face the constant danger that they will sense their learning difficulties and develop a sense of futility in that regard. As we proceed, we will discuss specific ways to deal with this. But for now, suffice it to say that you must be aware of this danger and its origins. The achievement targets we set for those who struggle to learn will be framed in their Individual Educational Plans (IEPs). We must be sure those are based on their real level of learning to date—that is, their current place in the learning progression you have planned for them. There is no place for “ought to be” or “should have learned” or “grade-level expectation” in this context if they fail to represent a student’s actual starting point for learning. It is only with dependable diagnostic evidence that we can answer the driving question that must be the focus of classroom assessment and instruction: What comes next in the learning? It is neither ethical nor pedagogically sound to hold students accountable for achievement targets they have no hope of hitting. This dooms them to inevitable failure and that is unacceptable. The effect of doing so will be a loss of confidence for the student and the rapid development of that sense of futility that leads to hopelessness.

FIGURE 1.1

Keys to Assessment Quality



On the other hand, if we manage their learning in a continuous-progress manner and at a rate appropriate for them, keeping them in touch with their own improvement through their involvement in assessment, we can keep them believing that success (as defined for them in terms of their special needs) is within reach.

GUIDES TO VALID AND RELIABLE ASSESSMENT EFFECTIVELY USED

Starting now, our job herein is to teach ourselves out of jobs. In other words, our job is to help you reach a place where you no longer need us or your professor to tell you whether your assessment practices are sound—a place where you know when you have done well because you can *apply the criteria that define sound assessment to your own work*.

Your job in your classroom is exactly the same as ours here: to take your students to a place where they no longer need you to tell them whether they have done well, but rather where they know this in their own minds because they understand the criteria that define high achievement—just as Ms. W. helped Emily and her classmates learn.

As we proceed toward this end, you will see (indeed, already have seen) repeated reference to a set of guiding principles. They are represented graphically in Figure 1.1. We highlight them with you here at the outset as interrelated themes that map the path to valid and reliable assessment. The order in which they are presented is immaterial; each principle is profoundly important. Together, they represent the concrete foundation on which we will build the structure of your understanding of how to assess well in your classroom.

Time for Reflection

As you read about these principles, keep Ms. W. and Emily in mind and you will see why we started our journey together with their story. In fact, it might be helpful to take a few minutes to reread the story if you wish to be in close touch with it (not essential). In any event, make note of where in the story you find evidence that Ms. W. attended to each of these principles. Then, discuss them with your teammates.

Guiding Principle 1: Start with a Clear Purpose: Why Am I Assessing?

Classroom level is part of a larger assessment system that exists within schools and districts to meet the information needs of a variety of different users. In other words, as specified previously, such systems need to acknowledge that a variety of decision makers need access to different kinds of information in different forms at different times to help students learn and report of their success. Beyond the classroom, we find instructional decisions focused on program evaluation and improvement that reaches across classrooms and schools. And beyond these, annual district accountability, policy, and resource allocation assessment users make more key decisions. These different assessment users bring different information needs to the table. We will explore these in depth in Chapter 2. If any users' information needs are ignored or they are provided with misinformation due to inept assessments, ineffective decisions will filter down to harm student confidence, motivation, and learning, as well as teacher efficacy.

For this reason, the starting place for the creation of a quality assessment for use in any particular context must be a clear sense of the information needs of the assessment user/decision maker to be served. Without a sense of what kind of information will help them and, therefore, what kind of assessment must be conducted, the assessor cannot proceed with productive assessment development or use. If they do proceed in the absence of a clear purpose, the results will be (and often is) the inept assessment and ineffective communication and use of results.

Guiding Principle 2: Start with Clear and Appropriate Achievement Targets: Assess What?

The quality of any assessment depends on how clearly and appropriately you define the achievement target you are assessing. In our opening vignette, a breakthrough in student writing achievement occurred in part because the English department faculty returned from that summer institute with a shared vision of writing proficiency. They built their program, and thus the competence of their students, around that vision.

You cannot validly (accurately) assess academic achievement targets that you have not precisely and completely defined. There are many different kinds of valued achievement expectations within our educational system, from mastering content knowledge to complex problem solving, from performing a flute recital to speaking Spanish to writing a strong term paper. All are important. But to assess them well, you must ask yourself, “Do I know what it means to do it well? Precisely what does it mean to succeed academically?” You are ready to assess only when you can answer these questions with clarity and confidence.

If your assignment is to promote math problem-solving proficiency, you must become a confident, competent master of that performance domain yourself. Without a sense of final destination reflected in your standards, and signposts along the way against which to check students’ progress, you will have difficulty being an effective classroom assessor or teacher.

Guiding Principle 3: Create High-Quality Assessments That Yield Dependable Information

To be of high quality (that is, to consistently produce accurate results), assessments need to satisfy four specific quality standards. They must do all of the following:

1. Rely on a proper assessment method (a method capable of reflecting the target).
2. Sample student achievement appropriately (provide enough evidence).
3. Be built with high-quality ingredients (good test items and scoring schemes, for example, not bad).
4. Minimize distortion of results due to bias (more about this later).

Assessments that meet these standards can support *valid* and *reliable* inferences about student learning. All assessments must meet these standards. No exceptions can be tolerated, because to violate any of them is to risk inaccuracy, placing student academic well-being in jeopardy. This is the first of many discussions and illustrations of these quality standards that permeate this book. On this first pass, we intend only to give you a general sense of the meaning of *quality*.

Guiding Principle 4: Communicate Results Effectively

Mention the idea of communicating assessment results and the first thoughts that come to mind are of test scores and grades attached to very briefly labeled domains of achievement such as *reading, writing, science, math*, and the like. When the purpose of the communication is to report the sufficiency of student learning for accountability purposes, this level of detail can work. Remember in our opening vignette the English faculty started with a clear vision of the meaning of academic success in writing in their classrooms and communicated that meaning effectively to students, parents, and school board members. They accomplished this with summary performance ratings depicting typical gains in achievement.

However, when the purpose of the communication is to support learning—not merely report it—then mere summaries (grades, scores or ratings) will not do the job. In those cases, students need access to descriptive feedback focused on specific attributes of their work revealing how they can do better the next time. In other words, numbers and grades are not the only—or in certain contexts even the best—way to communicate about achievement. We can use words, pictures, illustrations, examples, and many other means to convey this information.

So effective communication of assessment results turns on the purpose for the communication. Teachers must understand how to balance their use of feedback to support learning with communication about the sufficiency of student learning at accountability time. Using our GPS metaphor, we must communicate in ways that keep student on track as they learn and that report their arrival at the achievement destination when that is appropriate.

AN OVERARCHING PRINCIPLE: STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

Within each of these four guiding principles—clear purpose, clear target, quality assessment, and effective communication—we can form a solid link to student involvement in classroom assessment during their learning. The strongest belief or value underpinning this book is that the greatest potential value of classroom assessment is realized when we open the process up *during the learning* and welcome students in as full partners. By now you understand that we refer here to far more than merely suggesting that students trade test papers or homework assignments and grade each other's work. That's strictly clerical stuff. We are suggesting something that goes far deeper.

Students who participate in the thoughtful analysis of quality work to identify its critical elements or to internalize valued achievement targets become better performers. When students learn to apply these standards so thoroughly that they can confidently and competently evaluate their own and each other's work, they are well on the road to becoming better performers in their own right. Consider Emily's case in our opening vignette. Ms. W. helped her to internalize key elements of good writing so she could understand the shortcomings of her own writing, take responsibility for improving them, and watch herself improve. Her confidence and competence as a partner in her classroom assessment came through loud and clear, both in the parent-teacher conference she led at midyear and in her commentary to the school board at the end of the year. Throughout this text, we offer many specific suggestions for melding assessment, instruction, and students in this way.

Time for Reflection

During your K–12 schooling years, did your teachers engage you in this kind of self-assessment? If they did, when they did involve you, how did they do so? What was that experience like for you—what impact did it have? If they did not, why do you think that was the case? Discuss this with your teammates.

Summary: The Importance of Sound Assessment

The guiding principles discussed in this chapter (and illustrated with Emily’s experience) form the foundation of the assessment wisdom all educators must master in order to manage classroom assessment environments effectively.

Teachers who are prepared to meet the challenges of classroom assessment understand that they need to do their assessment homework and be ready to think clearly and to communicate effectively at assessment time. They understand why it is critical to be able to share their expectations with students and their families and why it is essential that they conduct high-quality assessments that accurately reflect achievement expectations.

Well-prepared teachers realize that they themselves lie at the heart of the assessment process in schools and they take that responsibility very seriously. Competent teachers understand the complexities of aligning a range of valued achievement targets with appropriate assessment methods so as to produce information on student achievement that both they and their students can count on to be accurate. They understand

the meaning of *valid assessment* and they know how to use all of the assessment tools at their disposal to produce valid information to serve intended purposes.

Effective classroom assessors/teachers understand the interpersonal dynamics of classroom assessment and know how to set students up for success, in part through using the appropriate assessment as a teaching tool. They know how to make students full partners in defining the valued targets of instruction and in transforming those definitions into quality assessments. They understand how to use them as satellite signals in a GPS-style classroom assessment environment.

As teachers involve students in assessment, thus demystifying the meaning of success in the classroom, they acknowledge that students use assessment results to make the decisions that ultimately will determine if school does or does not work for them. Our collective classroom assessment responsibility is to be sure students have access to and understand the information they need to see themselves growing over time.

Final Chapter Reflection

Each chapter in this text will conclude with a brief and consistent set of questions for you to reflect on to solidify your understanding and ease your transition to subsequent chapters. Please take time to record your answers in your journal. They will help you make key connections as we continue our journey through the realm of classroom assessment.

- 1. What are the three most important new insights to come to you as a result of your study of this chapter?*
- 2. What questions come to mind now about classroom assessment that you hope to have answered in subsequent chapters?*

Practice with Chapter 1 Ideas

The following activities provide opportunities for your personal reflection on ideas presented in Chapter 1 and may serve as an excellent basis for discussion of those ideas among classmates:

1. Read the following classroom assessment scenarios. Is each likely to increase or decrease student confidence and motivation to learn? Why?
 - Alan is having his students score each other's quizzes and then call out the scores so he can enter them in his gradebook.
 - Students in Eileen's class are discussing some samples of anonymous science lab notes to decide which are great examples, which have some good points, and which don't tell the story of the lab at all well. They're gradually developing criteria for improving their own lab "learning logs."
 - Catherine has just received back a grade on a report she wrote for social studies. She got a D+. There were no other comments.
 - Students in Henry's basic writing class are there because they have failed to

meet the state's writing competency requirements. Henry tells students that the year will be a time of learning to write. Competence at the end will be all that matters.

- Jeremy's teacher tells him that his test scores have been so dismal so far that no matter what he does from then on he will fail the class.
 - Pat is reading her latest story aloud for the class to critique. Like each of her classmates, she's been asked to take notes during this "peer assessment" so that she can revise her work later.
2. Think of an assessment experience from your personal educational past that was a GOOD experience for you. What made it a productive experience? What emotional and learning impact did it have for you? Now think of one that was a BAD experience for you. What made it a counterproductive experience? What was its emotional and learning impact? What were the procedural differences between the two experiences? How do those differences relate to the Guiding Principles described at the end of this chapter?



Now go to www.myeducationlab.com to take a Pretest to assess your initial comprehension of chapter content, study chapter content with your individualized Study Plan, take a Posttest to assess your understanding of chapter content, practice your teaching skills with Building Teaching Skills exercises, and build a deeper, more applied understanding of chapter content with Homework and Exercises.