

**Best Practice: New Standards for teaching and learning in America's Schools; Reading; Writing; Mathematics; Science; Social Studies; The Arts** Steven Zemelman, harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH 1998

### **Reflective Assessment**

In Best Practice classrooms, teachers don't just make up tests and put grades on report cards. They are less interested in measuring students' recall of individual facts or use of certain subskills than in how they perform the authentic, complete, higher-order activities that school aims for: reading whole books, drafting and editing stories or articles, conducting and reporting a scientific inquiry, applying math to real problem solving. Because progressive teachers want deeper and more practical information about children's learning, they monitor students' growth in richer and more sophisticated ways. More and more, teachers are adopting and adapting the tools of ethnographic, qualitative research: observation, interviews, questionnaires, collecting and interpreting artifacts and performances. They use information from these sources not mainly to "justify" marks on a report card, but to guide instruction, to make crucial daily decisions about helping students grow. And above all, they see the main goal of assessment to be helping students set goals, monitor their own work, and evaluate their efforts. Nothing more conclusively marks the well-educated person than the capacity to run one's own brain, have clear self-insight, and follow through on projects.

Many teachers now keep anecdotal, observational records, saving a few minutes each day to jot notes about students in their classes—some call this "kid-watching." Instead of numbers, letters, or symbols, teachers create written descriptions of what students are doing and saying. Some teachers put these observations on a schedule, tracking five particular kids on Monday, another five on Tuesday, and so forth. Some watch just one kid per day; some simply jot notes on any kids who show noteworthy growth, thinking, problems, or concerns on a given day; others prefer to record observations of the class as a community. The common feature of these observational records is that teachers save time for regularly recording them, they develop a format that works for them, and they consistently use these notes both to guide their instruction and to communicate with parents and others about children's progress.

Teachers also use students themselves as self-observers in increasingly powerful ways. In face-to-face interviews, written questionnaires, or learning logs, teachers ask kids to record and reflect on their own work (e.g., books

read, experiments conducted). In Best Practice classrooms, it is common for students to have periodic "evaluation conferences" with their teachers, where both parties use their notes to review the child's achievements and problems over a span of time, and then set goals for the upcoming weeks or months. In a curriculum that values higher-order thinking as well as individual responsibility, such self-evaluation teaches multiple important lessons.

One of the most promising mechanisms for authentic evaluation is the student portfolio, a folder in which students save selected samples of their best work in a given subject. The practice of keeping such cumulative records has many benefits. First, of course, it provides actual evidence of what the child can do with writing, math, art, or science, instead of a mark in a grade book—which represents, after all, nothing more than a teacher-mediated symbolic record of a long-discarded piece of real work. These portfolio artifacts also invite all sorts of valuable conversations between the child and the teacher, children and peers, or kids and parents: How did you get interested in this? How did you feel while you were working on this? How did you solve the problems you encountered? What would you tell another student about this subject? What are you going to do next? The process of selecting and polishing items for inclusion in the portfolio invites students to become increasingly reflective about their own work and more skillful at self-evaluation.

When teachers try to add these new, more productive forms of evaluation to their classrooms, they will run into a time crunch unless they either subtract some old assessment activities or overlap the new assessments with something else. A good starting point is to review all the forms of evaluation underway in the classroom, terminating those that don't usefully steer instruction, advance kids' learning, teach students to self-evaluate, or produce artifacts worth saving. For many teachers, this may mean grading far fewer busy-work dittos, workbook pages, study questions, and worksheets. Instead of tabulating the errors in stacks of identical fill-in-the-blank worksheets, teachers instead can spend their precious evaluation time responding to each kid's whole original reports or stories, perhaps writing a personal note of response that gives guidance, as well as modeling solid adult writing.

The other key to implementing better assessments is to overlap assessment with instruction, instead of always relying on evaluations that occur separately, after the work is done (and when it is too late for students to improve their product or learn from the assessment!). Many, progressive forms of assessment are integral to learning itself. Reading and writing conferences are a case in point; when sitting down to talk with a child about her writing, the teacher can simultaneously and seamlessly gather information about the child's development as a writer. As the teacher jots down a few notes following each conference, a powerful record of growth is created. Similarly, when students and teachers together design scoring rubrics for class presentations, science experiments, or persuasive essays, they are

explicitly being taught the ingredients of a successful performance, right along with creating a mechanism to evaluate their efforts.

All these adjustments mean that teachers are making a time trade: they're not spending any less time on evaluation, but they're also not spending more. They're differentiating their assessment efforts, looking at children's growth in a wider variety of ways. They are committed to the principle that the most valuable assessment activities are **formative**, aimed at understanding a child's development and making instructional decisions about that child. **Summative** evaluation, the process of converting kids' achievements into some kind of ranked, ordinal system that compares children to each other, needs to happen far less often, if at all.

### Suggested Further Readings

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- Wiggins, Grant. 1998. *Educative Assessment: Designing Assessments to Inform and Improve Student Performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Woodward, Helen. 1994. *Negotiated Evaluation: Involving Children and Parents in the Process*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.