

2

Assessment Literacy 2.0

In This Chapter You Will Learn:

- How and why assessment literacy can benefit all educators.
- The importance of formative assessment.
- Why a shared understanding of assessment-related terms is necessary.
- The differences between assessments *for* and *of* learning as applied to in-school CFAs, district benchmarks, and standardized achievement tests.

Every educator must understand the principles of sound assessment and must be able to apply those principles as a matter of routine in doing their work. Accurate assessment is not possible unless and until educators are given the opportunity to become assessment literate. [They] must understand student achievement expectations and how to transform those expectations into accurate assessment exercises and scoring procedures.

—National Education Association, 2003, p. 4

THE NEED FOR ASSESSMENT LITERACY

Exactly what is assessment literacy? It is the ability to understand the different purposes and types of assessment in order to select the most appropriate type to meet a specific purpose. How can improved assessment literacy benefit educators and students?

When [teachers] know and understand principles of sound assessment, know how to translate those principles into sound assessments

and quality information about students, and because they involve students in the assessment process as part of their effective instruction, a range of benefits will accrue to all. (Stiggins, 1997, p. 7)

As educators develop and refine their own assessment literacy, they become more confident in their ability to make use of a greater variety of assessment tools in their assessment toolkit. As they learn the specific attributes of each type of assessment and gain experience creating and using each type, they can more effectively match the right tool to the right job. Learning how to design a variety of effective assessments, rather than over-relying on one particular type, educators become more adept at utilizing multiple measures to reveal student understanding.

Promoting a shared understanding of assessment literacy within a school faculty becomes especially important to grade- and course-level teachers when they design common formative assessments. Together the participating educators can deliberately select the particular type(s) of assessment that will best reveal their students' understanding of the unit learning intentions and student success criteria currently in focus. Should they later discover that the assessment type they first selected proves limited in providing the feedback they need on student progress, they will be better able to collaboratively decide upon a different type of assessment.

A fundamental principle of assessment literacy is rooted in the ability to answer the question, "Why assess?"

THE RATIONALE FOR ASSESSMENT

Why do educators assess? There are a host of reasons. In general, educators want to know if, and to what degree, students are making progress toward mastery of particular concepts or skills in the standards. They use assessment results to determine levels of proficiency, to assign letter grades, and to communicate to parents where students are and where they need to improve.

For their more immediate purposes, educators assess students (1) to evaluate the effectiveness of instructional strategies and make adjustments as needed, (2) to give students feedback about what they currently know and can do, and (3) to show students how to use feedback to determine where they need to go next in their learning.

Educators assess student progress informally through ongoing observations, questioning, dialogue, and anecdotal note taking. When they need a more formal method, they select or design an appropriate assessment

matched to their intended purposes and then use the student results to answer their questions about student learning.

The bottom line as to why educators assess is to accurately determine their instructional impact on student learning. The feedback from students' assessment results provides the authentic evidence of the efficacy of educators' efforts.

W. James Popham (2003) asks educators to think deeply about the following four questions during the planning stages of instruction and assessment:

- What am I really trying to teach?
- What do my students need to know and be able to do?
- How can I translate the big curricular goals . . . into specific teachable components?
- What do my students already know about the topic I'm planning to teach? (p. 5)

Each of these questions is addressed within the ten CFA 2.0 design steps. Educators "unwrap" the unit Priority Standards to identify key concepts, skills, and corresponding levels of cognitive rigor in Step 2. This clarifies what they are "really trying to teach" and "what students need to know and be able to do." By deciding the sequenced learning progressions in Step 9, they break down the "big curricular goals into specific teachable components." The pre-CFA for the unit of study, created in Step 7, reveals students' prior knowledge, "what students already know about the topic." From the resulting feedback, educators strive to correctly interpret student understanding in order to appropriately plan their instructional next steps.

No explanation about the purpose of assessments had a greater impact on my own understanding of assessment's essential function than these words of W. James Popham (2003):

Teachers use test [results] in order to make inferences about their students' cognitive status. Once those score-based inferences have been made, the teacher then reaches instructional decisions based (at least in part) on those inferences. *Educational assessment revolves around inference making.* (p. 60; italics added)

This passage again underscores the critical importance of *well-written* assessment questions. If the questions are flawed, the inferences educators derive from the students' feedback will be flawed, and the resulting instructional adjustments will likely not correct students' misunderstandings.

FOUNDATIONS OF ASSESSMENT LITERACY

Assessment literacy is founded upon six sequential steps that inform instructional decision making, reprinted here from *Rigorous Curriculum Design* (Ainsworth, 2010):

1. **Know your purpose.** Determine exactly what it is you want to find out, what it is you want the assessment to do, and why you are administering the assessment in the first place.
2. **Determine the appropriate assessment that will accomplish your identified purpose.** In this context, “appropriate” means the specific type(s) or format(s) most likely to tell you what you want to know (selected response, constructed response, and performance based).
3. **Select or create a quality assessment.** Take great care in choosing questions from an external source and/or crafting the assessment questions yourselves. If a question is faulty in any way, and students answer it incorrectly, educators will later have to determine whether the question itself was the problem or whether students simply did not know the content upon which it was based. Decide whether the planned questions included in the assessment will enable you to make an *accurate* inference as to what students know and can do.
4. **Administer and score the assessment; analyze the assessment results.** Look for evidence of student learning, specific to your purpose, in the student responses. Conduct an item analysis, determining which questions individual students answered correctly and which ones they did not.
5. **Make an accurate inference.** This will be possible only if the assessment questions that you selected or created in Step 3 are of quality and provide valid and reliable data.
6. **Adjust instructional decisions in a timely manner.** Determine instructional next steps for students based on the inferences you have made. (pp. 137–138)

Because no single assessment can fulfill *all* the purposes of assessment or provide comprehensive evidence of student proficiency, Carol Ann Tomlinson (1995) states,

Fruitful assessment often poses the question, ‘What is an array of ways I can offer students to demonstrate their understanding and

skills?’ In this way, assessment becomes a part of teaching for success and a *way to extend rather than merely measure* learning. (italics added)

How then do these assessment *purposes* translate to definable assessment *practices*? Let’s start with a well-rounded understanding of what formative assessments are.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT DEFINITIONS

There are many definitions and descriptions of **formative assessment**. Here is a sampling of definitions that collectively convey the essence of what formative assessment is and how it should be used:

- “Formative assessment is a planned process in which assessment-elicited evidence of students’ status is used by teachers to adjust their ongoing instructional procedures or by students to adjust their current learning tactics” (Popham, 2008, p. 6).
- “Formative assessment is a loop: Students and teachers focus on a learning target, evaluate current student work against the target, act to move the work closer to the target, and repeat” (Brookhart & Nitko, 2007, p. 116).
- “The purpose of formative assessment is to provide feedback to teachers and students during the course of learning about the gap between students’ current and desired performance so that action can be taken to close the gap” (Heritage, 2008, p. 2).
- “Assessments *for* learning happen while learning is still underway. These are the assessments that we conduct throughout teaching and learning to diagnose student needs, plan for next steps in instruction, provide students with feedback they can use to improve the quality of their work, and help students see and feel in control of their journey to success” (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006, p. 31).
- “Assessment *for* learning is any practice which provides information to pupils about what to do to improve. Assessment *as* learning is any practice which takes the ‘what to improve’ into ‘how to improve’” (Clarke, 2008, p. 9).
- “An alternative to consider is ‘assessment as feedback.’ . . . As teachers derive feedback information from assessments that they set (for) their students, there can then be important adjustments to how they teach, how they consider what success looks like, how they recognize students’ strengths and gaps, and how they regard their own effects on students” (Hattie, 2012, pp. 125–126).