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# Middle Ground

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## Finding Balance: Assessment in the Middle School Classroom

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Most teachers routinely develop and communicate to students and parents the various plans and policies that govern the middle school classroom. Usually, this includes a classroom management plan, a grading policy, an instructional plan linked to state and district curriculum standards, a homework policy, and perhaps an intervention plan detailing what will happen for students if they fall behind.

Rarely do teachers include a classroom assessment plan. Most teachers typically don't develop this plan because it has been our history to see assessment as a series of isolated testing events: tests given at the end of an instructional unit or time period, like the end of a semester.

However, as it turns out, students achieve at higher levels when teachers think more deeply about how their classroom assessments fit into their larger instructional environment.

### A Classroom Assessment System

Today, more teachers are thinking about assessment in their classrooms as a balanced system of components. One component, **summative assessment**, fulfills the traditional role of measuring student progress. Results from tests feed into an evaluation, like a mark in a grade book or a report card grade. Also known as assessments of learning, they reflect the level of student learning at a particular point in time.

Another component, **formative assessment**, is an ongoing process used to inform instructional decisions made by the teacher and student. This process can be extended to encourage and promote further learning. Formative assessments, linked to the targets of daily instruction, provide continuous information—what Margaret Heritage, assistant director for professional development at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) at UCLA, calls a "video stream"—as opposed to a summative snapshot.



Formative assessment happens while teaching is still underway, helping shape decisions about what needs to happen next to better prepare students for the summative assessment.

In a balanced classroom assessment system, neither of these two components is over- or under-used; they work together to generate the combined effects that are greater than the sum of the individual parts. When summative and formative classroom assessments are high quality and purposefully planned, they are synergistic parts of the same system and can help form a more complete and accurate picture of student learning.

We should point out that it isn't really the assessment itself that's formative or summative. We see plenty of products in the K–12 market advertised as "formative assessments," giving the false sense that what is formative is the instrument itself. It's really how the results of any assessment are *used* that determines the label to apply.

The purpose of the assessment may be to give students ungraded practice, help them see where they might improve, or inform teachers how they might adapt instruction to help get students to the target. Those are all formative purposes. If the purpose is summative, with an accountability end in mind, the results are used differently, perhaps to assign a grade, as an indicator of student proficiency, or to inform a decision about student placement.

### **Why Balanced Assessment?**

Beyond the commonsense appeal of balance, we advocate both balance and thoughtful attention to formative applications of classroom assessment because clear evidence describes the positive impact formative assessment practices can have on student engagement and learning.

A growing body of research shows that formative assessment does improve learning when students understand the intended learning and the assessment criteria, when feedback to students is accurate and descriptive, and, most importantly, when students are actively involved with their own assessment.

An extension of formative assessment, beyond providing the teacher with useful information, brings the *student* into the equation as an important user of assessment results. This is assessment for learning, in which students are intentionally involved in the entire assessment process.

Middle level education has long championed putting the student at the center of learning and engaging learners in ways that allow them to assume responsibility for their own success. Because assessment for learning does exactly that, it is not a far distance for middle level educators to travel. And it is well worth the trip; studies show that all students benefit, especially low achievers. Students can be involved in their own assessment by doing the following:

- Identifying the attributes of a good performance by using a rubric to analyze strong and weak anonymous work samples
- Learning and using strategies to self-assess
- Partnering with their teachers to set goals on what comes next in their learning based on current results
- Generating their own practice tests or test items using their understanding of the learning targets and working with each other to prepare and deepen their understanding
- Working with clearly communicated learning goals to keep track of their success and communicating that success to others, as in student-led conferences.

We want to make learning targets clear to students, give them feedback throughout their learning to help improve their performance, teach them how to generate their own feedback through self-assessment, and show them how to use the feedback and the evidence of their own progress to manage and adjust their own learning.

Part of the good news from this ongoing process is that they, not next year's students, reap the immediate benefits from the instructional improvements their teachers make in response to the "video stream" of evidence.

### **What Does It Look Like?**

First, an effective classroom assessment system needs to rely on assessments that meet standards of quality in order to work well. That means that teachers need the skill and knowledge to collect accurate evidence of student learning and to effectively use the process and the results to promote further learning. To do that, it is important for teachers to know how to

- Establish the purpose of each assessment and communicate how the results will be used and by whom.
- Be clear with students about what learning targets they are responsible for learning.
- Use an appropriate assessment method (selected response, essay, performance assessment, or personal communication) with procedures that ensure the accuracy of results.

- Effectively communicate the results to maximize further learning.
- Involve students where appropriate in the assessment process.

In Table 1 we describe these five indicators of classroom assessment competence for teachers in more detail. Most teachers have not yet had the opportunity to learn and apply these principles, and so it is likely that some professional development training is necessary so teachers can learn to incorporate them into their own classroom assessment practice.

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>1. Why Assess?</b><br/>Assessment Processes and Results Serve Clear and Appropriate Purposes</p>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers understand who the users and what the uses of classroom assessment information are and know their information needs.</li> <li>• Teachers understand the relationship between assessment and student motivation and craft assessment experiences to maximize motivation.</li> <li>• Teachers use classroom assessment processes and results formatively (assessment for learning).</li> <li>• Teachers use classroom assessment results summatively (assessment of learning) to inform someone beyond the classroom about students' achievement as of a particular point in time.</li> <li>• Teachers have a comprehensive plan over time for integrating assessment for and of learning in the classroom.</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>2. Assess What?</b><br/>Assessments Reflect Clear and Valued Student Learning Targets</p>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers have clear learning targets for students; they know how to turn broad statements of content standards into classroom-level targets.</li> <li>• Teachers understand the various types of learning targets they hold for students.</li> <li>• Teachers select learning targets focused on the most important things students need to know and be able to do.</li> <li>• Teachers have a comprehensive plan over time for assessing learning targets.</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>3. Assess How?</b><br/>Learning Targets Are Translated into Assessments That Yield Accurate Results</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers understand what the various assessment methods are.</li> <li>• Teachers choose assessment methods that match intended learning targets.</li> <li>• Teachers design assessments that serve intended purposes.</li> <li>• Teachers sample learning appropriately in their assessments.</li> <li>• Teachers write assessment questions of all types well.</li> <li>• Teachers avoid sources of bias that distort results.</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>4. Communicate How?</b><br/>Assessment Results Are Managed Well and Communicated Effectively</p>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers record assessment information accurately, keep it confidential, and appropriately combine and summarize it for reporting (including grades). Such a summary accurately reflects the current level of student learning.</li> <li>• Teachers select the best reporting option (grades, narratives, portfolios, conferences) for each context (learning targets and users).</li> <li>• Teachers interpret and use standardized test results correctly.</li> <li>• Teachers effectively communicate assessment results to students.</li> <li>• Teachers effectively communicate assessment results to a variety of audiences outside the classroom, including parents, colleagues, and other stakeholders.</li> </ul>    |

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| <p><b>5. Involve Students</b><br/> <b>How?</b><br/>                 Students Are Involved in Their Own Assessment</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers make learning targets clear to students.</li> <li>• Teachers involve students in assessing, tracking, and setting goals for their own learning.</li> <li>• Teachers involve students in communicating about their own learning.</li> </ul> |
| <p>From <i>Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing It Right—Using It Well</i>, by Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, and Chappuis. Portland, OR: ETS Assessment Training Institute, 2006. Used with permission from the ETS Assessment Training Institute</p> |  |

Once teachers use sound assessment practices, the best way to ensure balance is to have a plan—one focused on the learning to be achieved, not just the grades to be earned. As previously mentioned, it makes sense to create this as an extension of the instructional plan so that it springs up directly from the learning targets to be taught and assessed, truly making instruction and assessment a looping continuum.

Or, it might be a separate plan, still linked to the targets of instruction, based on a simple analogy: there are practice days and there are game days. The scheduled practice events, communicated to students in advance, are formative assessments: they could be homework, practice tests, first and second drafts, or personal communication strategies used by the teacher to collect information about student progress.

By intentionally planning for more practice, we de-emphasize the competitive nature of school and give students a chance to grow with feedback, risk free. Then, at some point, it is game day, when the teacher must make a judgment about the learning that has taken place. Leading up to that, teachers can review their assessment plan and ask:

- Have all students been given sufficient practice with the right content at the right level of difficulty? Are they ready to succeed on the summative assessment?
- Have I kept track of student progress by individual learning targets to know that they are ready?
- Have the observations and results from practice been reviewed and fed back into the teaching and learning process?
- Is there existing evidence of how well students have mastered the content that should "count?" Should any formative results contribute to the final grade?

Some teachers may need to adopt record-keeping practices different from their traditional system. That is, it may take a bit of getting used to when thinking about keeping track of formative results and holding them separate from summative marks. Some teachers use two grade books or use different sections in the same one. Others color code the two types of results, while others use a computer program for the summative results and a portfolio-type approach for the formative results, which students can also help manage and maintain.

Teachers can also self-monitor their assessment balance by keeping a simple log of the assessments *of* and *for* learning (see Table 2). Teachers also can use the log to audit a previous unit of instruction for which the assessments were already administered to check for balance.

| <b>Table 2: Auditing for Balance</b>   |            |     |    |                             |
|--|------------|-----|----|-----------------------------|
| List on this form the assessments you give during a unit. When you have finished teaching the unit, check for balance between assessments for and of learning. |            |     |    |                             |
| Unit Title: _____ Time Frame: _____  |            |     |    |                             |
| Assessment Title   | Date Given | For | Of | Learning Target(s) Assessed |
|  |            |     |    |                             |
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### In Closing

Teachers who attend to both the summative and formative components of a balanced classroom assessment plan know that other components integrate to form the larger instructional system: curriculum maps, differentiated instruction, standards-based grading practices, homework policies, and communication of student progress, to name a few.

Although perhaps not always seamless, and certainly not always easy, this systemic approach can benefit teachers and students because it is set up for rapid response on the part of both.

The high-stakes, large-scale accountability tests that continue to drive school improvement are but a small fraction of the assessments students experience throughout school. The vast majority of a student's assessment life is spent with teacher-developed classroom assessments, geared to what's happening in the classroom right now.

Once teachers know how to do it right (assess accurately) and use it well (to both promote and verify learning), they can use the entire assessment process as a fulcrum to help students learn how to self-manage their own learning. And for students in the middle, that contribution to their success can truly be lifelong.

### Resources

"The Best Value in Formative Assessment," by Stephen Chappuis, and Jan Chappuis. *Educational Leadership*, December 2007/January 2008.

"Formative Assessment: What Do Teachers Need to Know and Do?" by Margaret Heritage. *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 2007.

*Assessment Manifesto: A Call for the Development of Balanced Assessment Systems*, by Rick Stiggins. Portland, OR: ETS Assessment Training Institute, 2008. The publication can be accessed at [www.nmsa.org](http://www.nmsa.org)

*Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing It Right—Using It Well*, by Rick Stiggins, Judith Arter, Jan Chappuis, and Stephen Chappuis. Portland, OR: ETS Assessment Training Institute, 2006. The publication is available from [www.nmsa.org/store](http://www.nmsa.org/store)

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