



ACTIVITY 1.3

Discussing Key Assessment Concepts With Faculty

PURPOSE

This activity is designed for use by building-level leaders to engage staff in brief introductory discussions of three key concepts: student involvement, assessment accuracy, and the learning team professional development model.

TIME

20–30 minutes for each concept

MATERIALS NEEDED

A copy of the selected reading for each participant

SUGGESTED ROOM SETUP

Tables and chairs set for ease of discussion among participants

CONTEXT

This activity includes three readings: “Engaging Students in the Assessment Process,” “Assessment Accuracy,” and “Developing Assessment Literacy and Competency.” These brief pieces have been adapted from a series of readings written by Charles Osborne, Director of Assessment, Burleson (TX) Intermediate School District, for principals in his district to use with staff to engage in conversations about classroom assessment. This district uses the text *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning* (J. Chappuis, Stiggins, Chappuis, & Arter, 2012) with learning teams as the primary professional development model for developing classroom assessment expertise. The readings and discussions are one part of the district’s multiyear support for school principals as they build awareness of the need with their faculties. The first two readings introduce ideas taught in *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning*. The third selection introduces the learning team approach to developing classroom assessment expertise.

DIRECTIONS

1. Each reading is preceded by notes for the discussion leader and followed by one or more discussion questions, labeled “Personal Reflection.” You can use one, two, or all three of the readings, depending on the topics you wish to introduce to your staff. You may want to use the discussion questions that follow each reading and may also want to create one or more that relate the content to your own context.
2. Identify which of the three readings you will use. Copy the text of the reading for participants.
3. Distribute the reading, either at the beginning of the meeting or in advance. (If participants are to read it during the meeting, allow an additional 10 minutes.)

4. Ask participants to discuss their thoughts about the content of the reading and their responses to the “Personal Reflection” questions (or your own discussion questions) in small groups and then open the discussion up to the large group.

Reading 1: Engaging Students in the Assessment Process

Notes for the Discussion Leader

This reading (Figure 1.5) briefly describes four sequential avenues for student involvement. As we succeed in getting students actively engaged in the classroom assessment process a different dynamic begins to work. We begin to see that not only a balance of assessment *of* and *for* learning but also the assessment activities, with student involvement, actually form a bond with the instructional process and we start to see assessment *as* learning. This is when the role of assessment goes beyond the measurement of learning to serve as an instrument of instruction and learning. This is most evident when students are directly involved in informal classroom assessment activities, which serve not only to inform teacher and students of the learning at a given point in time but also as tools to enhance student understanding and learning.

This is an aspect of assessment that we will scarcely see until students are actively involved in the classroom assessment process. When this happens, the connection between classroom instruction and classroom assessment takes on a new dimension. At times it will be difficult to draw a clear line defining if an activity is an instructional strategy or an assessment strategy. We will arrive here as we continue to advance in broadening and improving our classroom assessment and increasing students’ involvement in the assessment process.

Figure 1.5 Engaging Students in the Assessment Process

The idea that we need to include and engage students in the assessment process can generate a number of questions and conflicting understandings. Is student involvement in place if you let the students grade their own papers? Does student involvement mean that students write the tests? These are two examples of the misunderstanding that surround this concept of student involvement.

If we are to succeed in transforming from a teaching organization to a learning organization, it becomes essential that learners become actively involved in the assessment process. How can we become a learning organization if learners are not involved in assessment of the learning? How can we ensure that the learner is involved in a way to enhance learning? In this reading we are going to look at the meaning of including and engaging students in the assessment process. We look at four avenues within the process where student involvement is most important.

Clearly Defined and Understood Learning Targets

The first avenue of student involvement coincides with one of classroom assessment’s core competencies: the importance of clearly defined, articulated, and understood learning targets. While a clear learning target is vitally important to high-quality teaching, it is also essential to achieving high-quality learning. When students know and understand the intended learning, their ability to hit that target greatly increases. Developing and writing the targets is the first stage, but the ultimate benefactors of clear targets are the students. A simple method to gauge this is to ask students about the learning targets. Either of the questions “What are you learning?” or “Why are you doing this activity?” should generate a response that includes a description of the learning target.

Student Self-Assessment

The second avenue of student involvement lies in students possessing and practicing the skill of self-assessment relative to the demands of the learning target. This is a skill that must be taught. Self-assessment involves far more than “find the ones you got wrong and correct them.” It involves students evaluating their work against the clear learning target by using their understanding of that target and the samples of quality and problematic work provided by the teacher. To maximize learning, this self-assessment occurs prior to turning in an assessment, with opportunities to revise their work before it is graded.

Tracking Their Own Progress

The third avenue of student involvement leads to students tracking their progress in learning through record keeping of that progress. In the acquisition of any knowledge or skill there is a learning progression through which learners pass. As they progress upward toward the knowledge and skill demanded by the state standards, the clear learning targets provide the ladder of ascension. Learners should be able to accurately track the progress of their learning, where they currently stand on the ladder, and the next steps in learning to ascend higher. This practice of tracking learning—whether through the use of a portfolio, tracking progress on individual learning targets, or some other method—serves as a powerful motivator to students to continue improving. It allows them to clearly recognize progress and instills a hope and anticipation of further learning and success. Students’ anxiety over report cards or surprise at the results is a clear indication that they have not been tracking their learning through the assessment process.

Communicating About Their Learning to Others

The fourth avenue of student involvement involves students clearly and accurately communicating about their learning progress to others. When they understand the learning targets, competently assess their own strengths and areas for improvement, and track their progress toward standards, communication of that progress becomes a powerful tool. Student-led parent conferences serve as a validation of student effort, confirmation of student progress, affirmation of student competence, and motivation for further learning. These conferences can range from total failure and disaster to exhilarating success. Which it will be hinges on whether students engaged in the actions described by the first three avenues. Student-led parent conferences with students who are not actively involved in the assessment process are a waste of time for the teacher, a source of embarrassment for the learner, and a cause of confusion or frustration for the parent. Conversely, a student-led parent conference where the student has been actively involved is a formula for satisfaction for the teacher, pride for the learner, and joy for the parent.

Source: Adapted with permission from Charles Osborne, Burleson Independent School District, Burleson, TX.

Personal Reflection

1. Do we have a method in place to determine that students truly understand and can articulate the learning targets they are responsible for mastering?
2. Am I actively cultivating the skills of self-assessment in my students? Where will I start in teaching these skills?
3. Are students able to track their progress toward mastery of the learning targets? Do I have one or more processes in place to help them do that?
4. What opportunities do students currently have to share their progress with others? What might we do to enhance those experiences for teachers, students, and parents?

Reading 2: Assessment Accuracy

Notes for the Discussion Leader

When it comes to classroom assessment, quantity does not guarantee quality. Although more frequent assessment can improve student achievement, frequent administration of inaccurate assessments holds little hope of improving student achievement. It would be somewhat similar to trying to lose weight and stepping on an inaccurate scale every day. And relying on textbook or other purchased assessments is also no guarantee of quality. This reading (Figure 1.6) introduces the three keys to classroom assessment quality—clear purpose, clear targets, and sound design—that are crucial to accuracy of results. (The other two keys—effective communication and student involvement—make up the “Effective Use” portion of the keys to assessment quality.)

As we make progress in using classroom assessment *for learning*, we must not assume that we can rely on already-developed assessments to ensure accuracy. For classroom assessment to deliver on the promise of unparalleled improvement in student performance and motivation, each teacher and administrator must invest time to learn how to evaluate assessments for quality.

Personal Reflection Questions for the Discussion Leader: As an instructional leader can I also serve as the assessment leader? How can I invest in my teachers becoming assessment literate regarding the quality of the assessments used daily? Am I able to review assessments and evaluate their quality?

Figure 1.6 Assessment Accuracy

Although following the principles and practices of classroom assessment for learning is an essential component in the process of improving student performance, the quality of those classroom assessments is not a neutral factor in the equation. If we attempt to practice assessment *for learning* with poor-quality assessments, we weaken our potential impact. Quality trumps quantity in classroom assessments when improving student learning is the primary value.

Assessment Purpose

The first key to accuracy addresses the intended purpose of the assessment. It asks two questions: “Who is going to use this information?” and “How will they use it?” You may be the person using the information, and you may be gathering it to determine a grade, diagnose learning levels, monitor progress, audit the curriculum, group students by needs, sort students for intervention, or any of a plethora of other purposes. Additionally, you may want the information to function as feedback to students, guiding their next steps, or you may want students to use the information to self-assess and set goals for further learning. It is important to note that a single assessment may not be capable of serving a multitude of purposes, because the resulting data may be inadequate or even inaccurate for the decisions we attempt to make. If we are going to have a quality assessment, we must first have a clearly defined purpose of that assignment or assessment—we must determine the intended uses of the information and then design or select the instrument so that it is capable of informing those decisions.

Targets to Be Assessed

The second key to accuracy focuses on the learning targets to be assessed. Are they clear? If the learning targets are vague, the quality of the assessment will suffer. Do our assignments and assessments reflect the learning targets students have had opportunity to learn? If our targets are unclear, or if our assignments and assessments do not reflect them, we are unable to accurately measure levels of student achievement or to accomplish any of the purposes we may have intended.

Assessment Design

The third key to accuracy concerns assessment design. Will the assessment give me accurate information about achievement of the learning targets that I can use as I intended to? This key has four parts—four “gatekeepers” to quality. The first gatekeeper is selecting the appropriate assessment method: Do we know how to choose assessment methods to accurately reflect the learning target(s) to be assessed? As educators we often tend to default to our favorite or the most simple to grade assessment method. Or we may defer that decision to the textbook or test publishers, which can limit what kinds of learning we assess. The second gatekeeper is sampling: Do the learning targets represent what was taught? Or what will be taught? Does the relative importance of each learning target match its relative importance during instruction? Is the sample size large enough to inform the decisions intended to be made, or is it part of a larger plan to gather evidence over time? A common error here is to include a mass of targets in a single assessment, producing insufficient data on any one target, which renders the assessment useless for any kind of “data-driven” decision making with regard to content standards mastered or in need of further work. The third gatekeeper is item quality: Do the assessment items themselves, the exercises or tasks, the scoring procedures and scoring guides all adhere to standards of quality? Do we know what to do to fix them when the answer is no?

Avoiding Sources of Bias and Distortion

The fourth gatekeeper is avoiding potential sources of bias and distortion: Is there anything in the assessment itself or in the conditions under which it is administered that could lead to inaccurate estimates of student learning? Do we know how to control for these problems in any given assessment method or context? Whether we are selecting or creating an assessment for classroom use, accuracy of results is dependent on the classroom teacher being able to answer each of these gatekeeper questions.

The skill of creating and selecting quality assessments does not come with age or experience. It comes with intentionally working to becoming assessment literate and competent. As we refine our assessment literacy and competency, it is our students who benefit the most.

Source: Adapted with permission from Charles Osborne, Burleson Independent School District, Burleson, TX.

Personal Reflection

1. When I use assessments in my classroom, do I consider the accuracy of the instrument? What am I doing to improve its quality?
2. Am I equipped to accurately evaluate the assessments I give?
3. What might I need to learn more about?

Reading 3: Developing Assessment Literacy and Competency

Notes for the Discussion Leader

This reading (Figure 1.7) defines *assessment literacy* as the possession of knowledge about principles of high-quality classroom assessment and *assessment competence* as the ability to apply that knowledge in the classroom to maximize student motivation and achievement. It then explains the learning team approach to developing both assessment literacy and competence, with rationale for why it is effective.

Figure 1.7 Developing Assessment Literacy and Competency

Assessment literacy refers to the knowledge and conceptual understanding of the principles of quality classroom assessment. When we possess assessment literacy, we can engage in informed conversation regarding classroom assessment, we can recognize good- and poor-quality assessments and assessment practices, and we can develop quality plans for implementation. *Assessment competency* refers to the consistent practice of high-quality student involved classroom assessment principles in ways that improve student learning. When we possess assessment competency, we can consistently *apply* the knowledge and understanding of assessment literacy in a variety of classroom settings and thereby have an impact on both student learning and motivation.

For many of us, training in assessment literacy and competency was not part of preservice education. Consequently, we may possess assessment literacy developed on the job and yet be lacking in assessment competency. As professional educators, each of us bears the responsibility for deepening our own level of expertise. We work in a district that puts great emphasis on providing professional development, but the responsibility for taking advantage of opportunities to further our capabilities lies with each of us individually.

Hands down, without any reservation, the best method of developing both personal assessment literacy and competency is through active participation in an assessment learning team. This professional development format requires three commitments: (1) to read a portion of the text selected for study, (2) to try one or more ideas out in the classroom, and (3) to meet with colleagues to discuss what you read, what you tried, and what you noticed as a result.

Assessment learning teams focus on the teacher as learner. They meet about every 3 weeks to review practices in assessment, to discuss reading assignments completed since the last meeting, at times to view videos, to share experiences, and to make plans for the next stages of learning and practice. Learning teams experience the greatest success when all members value and commit both to doing the independent work between meetings and to actively engaging in the collaborative work during meetings. When both these commitments are in place, assessment learning teams provide the very elements often lacking in other professional development efforts:

- They are ongoing throughout the year rather than a onetime training.
- They are job embedded and apply to our specific classrooms, grade levels, and subject areas.
- The content and meeting schedule can flex to meet the needs of team members.
- They allow team members to learn from each other as well as from selected resources.

Personal Reflection

1. What professional development have I participated in that has truly had a positive impact on my classroom practice?
2. What will I do this year to enhance my personal professional development in assessment literacy and competency?
3. Do I or would I consider engaging in team learning to enhance my assessment literacy skills? How can this approach help me become more confident in applying those skills in my classroom?