Classroom Assessment Competence: The Foundation of Good Teaching

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My focus is on a very specific component of teacher competence: effectiveness in the domain of classroom assessment. I zero in on this component because of its immense power. I’ve spent the last thirty to forty years of my life trying to understand the task, the demands of classroom assessment, how it links to student success, and how, therefore, to prepare teachers to be able to fulfill their assessment responsibilities. I want to describe what we believe to be the essential assessment responsibilities of teachers and their supervisors, as the link between the two is critical in this domain. In this discussion I will detail the essential assessment competencies that need to be part of the standards of teacher certification. In addition, I want to comment on what I understand to be our current level of assessment literacy nationwide, both in the classroom and at leadership levels. And finally, I will identify what I believe to be some keys to enhancing our collective levels of understanding of the basic principles of sound assessment.

At the Assessment Training Institute in Portland, we are aiming for an assessment future in schools that includes three active ingredients: (1) balanced assessment systems, or assessment systems that meet the information needs of all assessment users—not just those concerned with accountability; (2) quality assessments at all levels within such a system, all of which produce dependable information about student achievement; (3) productive assessment dynamics, reflecting a clear understanding of the emotional dynamics of the assessment experience from the learner’s point of view. I refer in this case to the concept of assessment FOR learning—that is, student involvement in the assessment process as a way to promote learning, not merely measure it.

In our work, we have come to understand over the last three decades that a teacher’s first and primary assessment responsibility is to gather accurate information about student achievement, because only then can students and teachers make high-quality data-based instructional decisions that will
promote greater learning. In addition, every teacher and every classroom must understand how to use the assessment process and its results, both to support student learning and to certify that learning. In the vision of quality assessment that we believe each teacher needs to make operational at any level of instruction, we’re going to use assessment both as a cause of learning and as a measure of effective learning. Both are important, but they are indeed different. Any teacher who can’t do both effectively will have some difficulty being effective in the classroom.

In order to conduct quality assessments, several key features need careful attention. For instance, assessors need to be clear about the purpose of the assessment. Depending on the context, different assessment users need different information in different forms at different times to do their jobs. If we don’t start with a clear sense of who we are trying to help with the assessment results and how we can help them, we have no hope of building an assessment to meet their information needs. Second, teachers need to start with a clear and appropriate vision of the learning target. They can’t create assessments that accurately reflect learning targets that have not been clearly, completely, and appropriately defined. Third, once there is a vision of the target and a sense of the information needs of the user, then and only then can one design an assessment to fit that context. Fourth, once we have those assessments designed, we can use them and communicate the results back into the hands of the intended user in a timely and understandable way. Even the most valid and reliable assessment in the world is wasted if its results are miscommunicated.

But in addition to these four keys to quality assessment, there is a fifth related to the effective use of assessments in the classroom: student involvement in the process while they are learning. As it turns out, students are key data-based instructional decision makers too—maybe the most important ones. They can contribute most productively to their own learning success when we share with them student-friendly versions of the learning targets from the beginning of the learning. In fact, it turns out to be an immensely productive instructional intervention to engage students in the development and use of practice assessments like those that they are going to be held accountable for later on. And it’s also possible to then involve students as partners in telling the story of their own journey to academic success, as in the case of student-led parent-teacher conferences, which is easily the biggest breakthrough to happen in communicating about student achievement in the last one hundred years.
To summarize, at ATI, we believe every teacher in every classroom must know why they are assessing, what they are assessing, how to create a quality assessment for that particular context, and how to communicate results effectively. Further, involving students in the process of assessing and communicating results makes sense as an important part of the teaching and learning process. Any teacher who cannot do these things will not be able to function effectively in the classroom. These standards are not negotiable.

At a deeper level of detail about the classroom assessments instruments or processes themselves, in designing quality assessments, each and every teacher must understand what assessment method to use and when and how to use each effectively to sample student performance and minimize biases that can distort the results. Any teacher in any context who doesn’t know how to meet these standards of quality practice will not be able to be effective in the classroom because the assessments they use may misrepresent the truth about student learning. The only available assessment methods are selected response (such as multiple choice) written response (short or extended essay) performance assessment, and direct personal communication or interaction with the student. Every teacher in every classroom must absolutely understand that these methods are not interchangeable; they don’t get to have a favorite and use it every time if it’s incapable of reflecting the target. None of these methods is inherently superior, and each brings strengths and weaknesses. Any teacher who does not know these differences and their operational implications will not be able to function effectively in the classroom.

Research tells us that the typical teacher will spend a quarter to a third of her or his available professional time involved in assessment-related activities (Stiggins and Conklin 1992). If they do it well, we have compelling evidence from literally around the world over the last few years revealing that we can expect .4 to .8 standard deviation gains in performance on high-stakes tests directly attributable to the manner in which the classroom assessment is managed (Black and Wiliam 1998; Hattie and Timperley 2001). There is no question about the relationship between this vision of assessment and subsequent student success. Research tells us that high-impact practices increase the quality of classroom assessments, increase reliance on descriptive feedback, decrease reliance on judgmental feedback, increase opportunities for student self-assessment, and increase opportunities for students to track their own achievement and communicate about changes in their own capabilities over time. There is no question about what teachers
need to know and be able to do, no question about what will happen to
student learning if they can do those things. And there is no question about
how to deliver these tools into their hands through very effective pre-service
and in-service teacher development. The remaining question is will they be
given the opportunity to learn or won’t they, and historically the answer to
that question has been no, they will not. It has been so for decades across the
United States. If it remains so in the future, quality assessment day to day
during the learning will remain out of reach and the readily available
achievement gains will remain beyond reach, too.

But teacher competence alone will not suffice if your mission is to tap
assessment as the powerful school improvement tool it can be. We also need
strong national, state and local educational leadership. For example, at the
local school district level, district and building administrators need to be able
to build a balanced local assessment system to support and certify learning,
continue to refine achievement standards, ensure local assessment accuracy,
balance local communication systems to support and certify learning, and
ensure a foundation of assessment literacy among local faculty and staff.
Each of these lays a foundation from which teachers can be wonderful from
a classroom-assessment point of view. If these district and building
conditions are not satisfied, these teachers will have difficulty functioning
effectively in the domain.

The concept of balanced local assessment systems affirms the importance of
the classroom level of assessment. Balanced assessment systems at the local
level combine three levels of assessment, each of which meets the
information needs of its users. First, the classroom level of assessment
provides students, teachers, and sometimes parents with the information
they need. Second, it has currently become popular to have
interim/benchmark assessments available for some purposes. And, of
course, there is also annual testing serving its intended purposes. A balanced
assessment system meets the information needs of all these users. But in
terms of relative importance based on frequency alone, the classroom
assessment is a continuous enterprise, while interim/benchmark assessment
happens occasionally, and the annual assessment happens once a year.
Which one is likely to be able to exert the greatest influence on student
achievement? In addition, a balanced assessment system both supports and
certifies learning. When considering assessments that support learning,
assessments for learning, we must ask, How much have students learned as
of a particular point in time? Remembering that 99.9 percent of the
assessments that happen in a student’s learning life happen in the classroom on a day-to-day basis at the behest of their teachers, and that 100 percent of those that are likely to help students learn more happen in the classroom, which level of assessment should be receiving most of our assessment resources? This is why our guiding principle at ATI is this: If assessment isn’t working productively day to day in the classroom, that is, if bad decisions are being made based on inaccurate evidence due to inept classroom assessment, the other two levels of assessment cannot overcome the dire consequences for the learner. The learning has already stopped or been damaged if it’s not done well. If it is done well, we can expect a .4 to .8 standard deviation gain in student achievement directly attributable to the manner in which teachers manage the day-to-day classroom assessment process, with the largest gains coming for perennial low achievers. That is compelling evidence of narrowing of the achievement gap. There is no such evidence available for annual assessment or interim/benchmark assessment. This doesn’t mean we should stop testing at those levels. They have contributions to make. It just means that we must get in balance in our assessment systems.

Yet with all of the evidence from around the world of the power of the classroom level of assessment, it continues to be the case that pre-service teacher preparation programs frequently fail to include relevant helpful training in the management of classroom assessment. And resources for in-service training are very thin and growing even thinner. And lest we think that teachers can turn to their leaders for assistance in the domain of professional practice, it remains the case that relevant helpful assessment training remains nonexistent in leadership preparation programs across the United States. In these times, how can we justify that? This leaves teachers with no place to turn for help should they want it, because often they know more about good assessment practices than do their principals. We have work to do in this regard. National, state and professional association certification standards—including NCATE, InTASC, TPAC, and NBPTS—continue to include a demand for high-quality assessment practices. All make direct reference to high levels of assessment literacy in the classroom. And yet we remain a national faculty of teachers and school leaders unschooled in the principles of sound assessment practice because we have yet to be given the opportunity to develop those competencies. Of course there are noteworthy exceptions to this. But we live in a society that is (and should be) operating on the mistaken belief that teachers and school leaders
are assessment literate. This is (or should be) an embarrassment to the school community because it turns out that when practitioners are sufficiently schooled in the basic principles of sound assessment, profound achievement score gains result for students, with the largest gains coming from perennial low achievers. Ensuring sound assessment practice is a local responsibility; this is not federal government work nor is it state consortium work. It’s the responsibility of each local school district to make sure that their faculties are adhering to principles of sound practice. That doesn’t mean that the federal government and consortiums can’t help and support that process, but it is a local process because balanced high-quality assessment systems are local. We need to demand this and provide opportunities to learn.

To repeat, we know what teachers and school leaders need to know and do to assess effectively. We know what will happen to student learning if they do the right things. We know that professional development can deliver those tools effectively and efficiently. There is no mystery about any of this; the remaining unanswered questions are these: Will they be given the opportunity to learn to become assessment literate, and will we certify assessment literacy in appropriate terms at licensure time? We are making progress on these fronts. The state of Kentucky and other states have been moving forward productively in promoting policy around sound assessment practices. The federal government, state policy education leaders, professional associations and, especially, licensing entities need to step up and take responsibility for making sure that this continues. There are four key ways to ensure a foundation of assessment literacy. We need (1) to be totally up front and honest with the public and policy makers about the current state of assessment literacy affairs; (2) continue developing professional standards that demand competence in assessment; (3) build certification processes that accurately reflect applications of assessment in the classroom as a basis for determining preparedness to teach; and (4) require pre-service teacher and school leader preparation and assessment, ensuring in-service training where needed. I remind you that the typical teacher will spend a quarter to a third of her or his available professional time involved in assessment-related activities. If they do it well, students prosper; if they do it poorly, students suffer. We cannot remain a nation so completely obsessed with test scores, and yet understand so little about sound assessment practice at federal, state, and local levels of our educational infrastructure. The alternative is, once and for all, to build the
professional foundation of assessment literacy needed to both support and certify student learning in a balanced manner. The result can be unprecedented gains in student success. We have a lot of work to do.

References

