



Balanced Assessment Systems and Student Learning

What does it look like when assessment is done well in the classroom? The good news is that many teachers can already answer this question. They know that sound assessment practice asks them to do the following:

- Establish clear learning targets that form the basis for both instruction and assessment.
- Ensure that their assignments and assessments match the learning targets that have been or will be taught.
- Select the proper assessment methods to match types of learning targets.
- Create and/or select assessment items, tasks, and scoring guides that meet standards of quality.
- Use the results of the assessment in ways that are aligned with the purpose for the assessment. In other words, they balance formative and summative purposes to meet the information needs of all users of the results, including students.
- Provide students descriptive, useful feedback during the learning process, not just at the end of a unit in the form of a grade on a test.
- When appropriate, involve students in the assessment process as both an instructional strategy and a way to increase student motivation by developing students' ability to self-assess, set goals for further learning, and self-regulate.

2 Balanced Assessment Systems

Educators who do these things are *assessment literate*. Assessment literacy is, in part, having the knowledge and skills needed for effective use of assessment practices and results to both promote and measure learning. Our shortcut for that definition is “Doing It Right—Using It Well.” Assessment literate teachers can fold assessment results back into instruction, integrate formative assessment strategies into daily instruction to improve learning, appropriately use different types of data for the decisions they make about teaching and students, and use sound grading practices to help communicate about student progress and learning.

The not-so-good news is that there are still far too many teachers who, through no fault of their own, assess the way they were assessed as students. Through a lack of exposure to sound assessment practice in both preservice and in-service, assessment practice in many classrooms remains what it always has been. It isn’t that unsound practice is simply the opposite of what assessment literate teachers do; it goes beyond that. The reality is that when assessment is done poorly, students are harmed. Yes, inaccurate results from a poorly constructed test will lead to a faulty score and eventually to a report card grade that may also be inaccurate. A confused or unclear understanding on the student’s part of the intended learning and acceptable performance can cause a mismatch between what the student delivered and what the teacher expected. But worse damage can be done: Student confidence and motivation can be harmed, possibly ending the desire to learn or even try. A faulty grade can be repaired, or a student might get a second chance on a test. But for students who have chosen to stop learning, those things no longer matter.

And when we as school leaders are not assessment literate, we also pay the price. Most of us have dealt with something like what follows, maybe more than once: a crying student in the office upset about an “unfair” test, the confused and angry parent believing his or her child has the short end of the stick when it comes to a certain grade, or the perceived need to defend a teacher in a public setting even if some of the assessment or grading actions appear questionable. Most school administrators have spent way too much time in these situations, sorting through the weeds of detail trying to find what, if anything, was wrong with the test items or precisely how an assigned grade was reached. Or, assuming a district policy on assessment and/or grading exists, if there was any violation from expected practice. It’s rarely easy or straightforward. But it need not be that way.

Assessing learning is one of the most important jobs of any teacher. We’ve already stated that we know exactly what to do to ensure that assessment is done right and the results are used well. But if that is so, why isn’t that common practice in all schools and all classrooms?

TODAY’S ASSESSMENT ENVIRONMENT

Assessment in schools continues to be a bumpy ride. The politics of testing seem to overwhelm its potentially positive role in teaching and learning. Debate continues about the federal government’s role in education and the punitive measures of accountability testing. Concerns about the costs and impact of over-testing, the instructional time lost, the uneven playing field, what the written (and tested) curriculum should consist of, where it should come from, who should define *poor performance*, whether parents

should opt their children out of testing programs, the cultural responsiveness of assessment practices, and the role of assessment in our schools in general are all real issues, and they play in most of our communities almost daily.

Furthermore, to achieve what began as a need for adequate yearly progress and what is now in many states pass/fail accountability grades for schools with attached rewards and punishments, districts and states have added more and more layers of both mandatory and voluntary testing. The desire to generate the data that is believed to be needed to improve schools has become a double-edged sword: What if we have more data but don't really know how to use it? What happens if we provide teachers item banks, but they either don't know how to use them effectively or the banks themselves are poorly aligned to what is taught in the classroom? Could the increased testing also increase pressure on teachers and schools to chase improved test scores at the expense of well-balanced learning? Or what if the increased amount of data we might now have isn't reliable, but we continue to make decisions about programs and students as if it is? And what happens if all our energies and resources are spent in pursuit of data at levels above the classroom, ignoring the clear research about the positive effects of day-to-day formative assessment at the classroom level?

Recognition of these problems is growing: The new federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) wants states and districts to examine their testing programs and instruments to decrease the amount of testing overall. But it's a bigger issue than that: Unless we are able to align a new, different framework for assessment's role in schools with the overall expectations of what schools are now asked to accomplish and produce, this testing turmoil is likely to continue.

ASSESSMENT AND THE NEW SCHOOL MISSION

The mission of the schools most today's adults grew up in was to begin the process of sorting students into the various segments of our social and economic system. Assessment's role in those days was to provide the evidence upon which to rank those who remained in school at the end of high school based on academic achievement. However, we have come to realize that many students who drop out or finish low in the rank order fail to develop the academic and lifelong learning skills needed to succeed in an ever-evolving world of work. And so schools were required to become accountable to leave no child behind; schools and all students were expected to meet high standards, narrow achievement gaps, reduce dropout rates, and make all students ready for college or workplace training. Schools have recently been released from the requirement that ALL students reach proficiency in math and reading, and although the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) cannot be mandated by the U.S. Department of Education, the commitment to rigorous standards and success for all students remains.

But as the mission of schools has changed, then so, too, must the role of assessment change (Stiggins, 2014). Instead of just providing evidence for grading and ranking students, assessment must go beyond tests and tools to include processes and strategies that encourage and support greater student achievement, especially for struggling learners. This can be done while also accurately measuring and certifying

student achievement. To do this we need to understand how to effectively use and balance both formative and summative uses of assessment. Doing so will help link assessment in the minds of educators and the public to something beyond test scores and reports. The concepts we introduce and describe in the following are not time-bound; they can cut across shifts in legislation, educational policy, and implementation strategies. To us they are commonsense ideas that can weather the storms of a changing mission and in fact can help it succeed.

BUILDING LOCAL ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS FOR BALANCE AND QUALITY

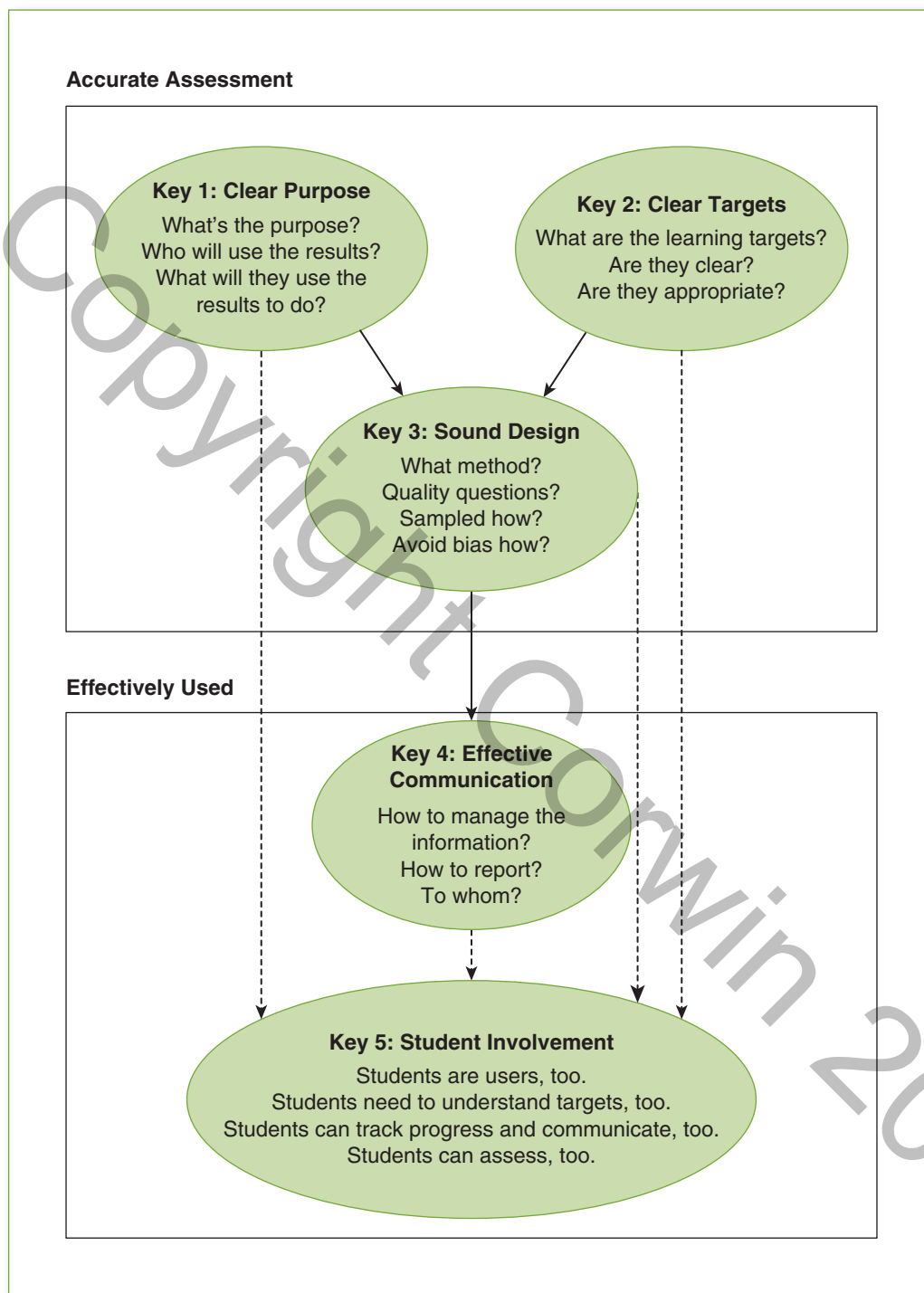
A *balanced assessment system* serves a variety of purposes, uses a variety of measures, and meets the information and decision-making needs of all assessment users at the classroom, building, and district levels. *High-quality, accurate assessments* provide these users with the dependable evidence of achievement they need to do their jobs and improve learning. And recent research has shown us learning can improve when *students* are involved in the process and included atop the list of key assessment users—in a new school mission, assessment should no longer be regarded merely as something students passively receive.

Assessment balance can best be achieved at the local school district level, because only local educational agencies have schools, classrooms, students, and teachers. For example, formative assessment is most effective in improving student learning when it is a process conducted by classroom teachers designed to help students learn more—it is not a function that can be served well by the U.S. Department of Education or state departments of education. Local school districts are best positioned to coordinate all the various levels of testing, including classroom assessment, and in doing so balance their assessment systems to serve both formative and summative purposes. Local district or school leadership teams can achieve this balance in assessment. Current schools or districts can conduct an assessment audit that acts as an inventory of the assessment “big picture” (see Activity 2.1 in Part 2), teachers can learn the principles of sound assessment, and by exercising leadership in assessment, school leaders can begin to take control of an entity in schooling that at times seems beyond our control.

Assessment quality and accuracy are required if we expect the decisions we make based on assessment results to be sound decisions. Going to the trouble to develop and administer more tests without first ensuring that the results will be accurate leads to a “garbage in, garbage out” end product. To ensure dependable results, assessments need to be developed that follow five criteria for assessment quality. Figure 1.1 highlights the component of quality assessments; three components focus on accuracy and two on effective use. In Part 2, we go into this model in more detail.

With *student involvement* in the assessment process (Key 5 in Figure 1.1) comes proven yet untapped potential for increased student learning. It is with formative assessment strategies in the classroom, what we call “assessment *for* learning,” where students are users, decision makers, and players in the entire process, where assessment becomes more about teaching and less about testing. If assessments are to support improvements in student learning, their results must inform students

Figure 1.1 Keys to Quality Classroom Assessment



how to do better the next time. To do this requires communicating results in ways that are understandable to the learner and helps guide the learner's actions. Single scores and grades at the end of a unit or term do not accomplish this. We address this topic in Part 2 and provide a framework for student involvement in formative assessment.

INSIDE THE SYSTEM

To start with, a balanced local assessment system approaches each assessment given with these questions:

- Who are all our assessment users?
- What are the reasons they assess (purpose)?
- What assessment results do they need?
- What assessment conditions need to be in place for them to get the information they need?

Who are they? In classrooms they are teachers and their students, along with parents sometimes. Beyond them there are curriculum directors, school principals, and teacher teams who rely on periodic (common/interim/benchmark) assessments to provide evidence of changes in student achievement for program planning and refinement purposes. And finally, school board members and other policy makers and school leaders who do, in fact, rely on annual test scores to inform broad program, resource allocation, and sometimes personnel decisions.

What is the purpose of the assessment, and what form of assessment results do they need? As mentioned earlier, there are two basic options:

- Assess to help students learn more; such *formative* practice happens during the learning and delivers information to learners to help them see how to do better the next time.
- Or the assessor can gather data from assessments to certify that students have met certain learning requirements, termed *summative* assessment.

Figure 1.2 compares the key differences between formative and summative assessment. Teachers can use formative assessment to diagnose student/group needs, track student progress, and plan changes and next steps in instruction. And in a form that intentionally involves students in the entire process, teachers can use formative assessment to help students better understand their learning destination (where they're headed), their current achievement status in relation to the target (where they are now), and how they (the student) can close the gap between the two. This is called "assessment *for* learning." In this model formative assessment is not a test or an instrument but an ongoing interactive process in which students become partners with their teachers. Teachers provide descriptive feedback to students during the learning on how they can continue to grow, conduct assessment activities that directly involve students, engage them in setting goals for what comes next in their learning, and teach them to track their progress toward that goal.

And as the local system must have balance, so should the classroom also be in balance. A heavy diet of formative practice or a steady stream of summative grading events defeats the purpose and misses the opportunity for students when both formative and summative assessments are used in tandem.

Just as formative assessment in the classroom is sometimes mistakenly seen as just another test, assessment literacy is sometimes confused with being solely about data literacy. All levels of assessment produce data, especially if the assessment is for summative purposes. But crunching the numbers so that we can be data-driven is only part

Figure 1.2 Comparing Formative Assessment and Summative Assessment: Overview of Key Differences

	Formative Assessment	Summative Assessment
Purpose(s) for Assessment	Provide students feedback regarding; their own progress; support student growth through self-assessment and goal setting; plan further/differentiate instruction/reteach; identify students with difficulty or misconceptions; identify targets/standards most difficult	Document individual or group achievement or mastery of standards; measure achievement status at a point in time for purposes of reporting; accountability via grading or scores; graduation and retention decisions
Audience/Users of Results	Students about themselves; teachers about students, standards, and instruction	Others (teachers, supervisors, etc.) about students
Content Focus for the Assessment	Learning targets that underpin the standards	Varies by level of assessment: the achievement standards for which schools, teachers, and students are held accountable; daily learning targets of instruction
Place in Time: When?	A process: practice, instructional activities and ungraded assessments during learning	Event after learning: tests, quizzes, reports, etc.
Typical Uses of Process or Results	Provide students feedback to improve; diagnose and respond to student/group needs; help parents support learning; students track their own progress vis-à-vis the target(s)	Certify mastery; sort/rank students for gatekeeper decisions, grading, graduation, or advancement
Teacher's Role	Inform students of targets in a manner they can understand; build quality assessments based on targets; adjust instruction based on results; involve students directly in assessment when appropriate	Develop the test to ensure accuracy and comparability of results; use results to help students meet standards; interpret results for parents; document for report card grading
Student's Role	Self-assess, set goals, track progress; act on descriptive feedback and classroom assessment results to be able to do better next time	Study to meet standards; take the test; strive for the highest possible score; avoid failure
Primary Motivator	Belief that success in learning is achievable	Threat of punishment, promise of rewards

Source: Chappuis, Jan; Chappuis, Steve, *Understanding School Assessment: A Parent and Community Guide to Helping Students Learn*, 1st Ed., © 2006, pp. 17–18. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., New York, New York.

of the whole. Assessment literate teachers understand that data comes from many sources and in different forms and know how to best use each in concert with the intended purpose of the assessment.

And finally, as noted, the primary goal of a balanced assessment system is to meet the information needs of all users in the system. To do so we believe the *conditions* below need to be satisfied across all assessments students take. These conditions reflect in different terms the five keys to quality shown in Figure 1.1.

- The *purpose for the assessment must always be clear* to all involved. We must know who will use the assessment results and how they will use them, whether to support student learning or to certify it.
- The *learning target(s) to be assessed must be clearly, completely, and appropriately defined*. When that is in place assessment items and tasks and scoring procedures can be developed or selected to reflect the intended learning.
- All *assessment instruments and procedures must meet accepted standards of quality* to provide the dependable results decision makers will use.
- Systems must be in place to *communicate assessment results effectively*. In this way we ensure timely communication in forms that ensure complete understanding by recipients.
- The *assessment/decision-making process acknowledges the direct link to student motivation*. Doing so assists both successful and struggling learners to remain confident that success is within reach, if they keep striving.

LEVELS OF ASSESSMENT USE

Assessment is, in large part, the process of gathering evidence of student learning to inform instructional decisions. Local district assessment systems promote student success when they help inform decisions that both support and verify learning, that is, when the system is designed to serve both *formative* and *summative* purposes across three main levels of assessment use.

The primary levels of assessment are (1) day-to-day *classroom* assessment, (2) *interim/benchmark* assessment, and (3) *annual* standardized testing. Figure 1.3 crosses these use levels with formative and summative uses to outline the integrated whole of a balanced system regarding the many purposes it must serve. These purposes derive from the answers for each level to the same questions listed earlier:

- Who are all our assessment users?
- For what reasons do they assess (purpose)?
- What assessment results do they need?
- What assessment conditions need to be in place for them to get the information they need?

What follows is a brief description of the three broad levels of assessment, preceded by the following qualifiers:

- Over the last decade or so assessments given at levels above the classroom have been known by different names: Short cycle, interim, and benchmark are but three examples.
- Sometimes these names or labels are interchangeable or synonymous; sometimes they are not. One district may use an interim assessment entirely for summative purposes, while another uses it primarily as a formative assessment. One may mirror items from the state accountability test, another uses items that are finer grained, closer to the level of classroom instruction. So it is difficult to capture every level, for every use, under one or two labels and have sufficient differentiation.

Figure 1.3 Framework for a Balanced Assessment System

Level/Type of Assessment	Formative Assessment for Learning	Formative Assessment	Summative Assessment of Learning
Classroom Assessment			
Frequency	Ongoing, day-to-day	Continuous; periodic, depending on level of assessment	Periodic monitors of student progress
Key Decision Maker(s)	Student/teacher team	Teacher	Teacher
Instructional Decisions to Be Made	Student: What comes next in my learning? Is the target clear enough for me? What gaps exist? Am I ready to move on?	Diagnose student strengths. What comes next in my students' learning? What misconceptions are present? What needs reteaching or differentiated?	What grade or standards mastered go on report card?
Information Needed to Inform Decisions	Student-friendly versions of standards deconstructed to learning targets of instruction Diagnostic evidence of student's current place in progressions and of problems students are having	Clear and communicated learning targets to students Evidence of standards mastered and not yet mastered, and types of problems students are having	Evidence of student mastery of each required standard
Common/Interim/Benchmark Tests			
Key Decision Maker(s)	Teachers; students can assist in interpreting results	Curriculum and Instructional leaders, teacher teams, PLCs	Curriculum and Instructional leaders
Instructional Decisions to Be Made	Which targets/standards do we (I) tend to struggle mastering and why? What will we do about it? Opportunities for goal setting and self-assessment if students have access to results	Which standards are our students struggling to master and why?	Which standards are broad samples of our students not mastering?
Information Needed to Inform Decisions	Evidence of standards I have yet to master: the learning is not over	Evidence from assessments across classrooms of standards not mastered	Evidence of standards mastered across broad samples using common assessments
Annual Tests			
Key Decision Maker(s)		<i>Only works if results reflect student mastery of each standard</i> Curriculum and instructional leaders	District leadership team, school board, and community

(Continued)

Figure 1.3 (Continued)

Level/Type of Assessment	Formative Assessment for Learning	Formative Assessment	Summative Assessment of Learning
Instructional Decisions to Be Made		What standards did our students not master? What groups of students struggled? What interventions can be planned? What programs need retooling?	Did enough of our students master required standards? Did the school(s) make sufficient progress?
Information Needed to Inform Decisions		Evidence of standards not mastered	Proportion of students and subgroups of student mastering

- In addition, many schools and districts now use what they call *common assessments*, which are very often associated with the professional learning community (PLC) model (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). We call this out as an assessment layer between the classroom and interim levels. We do so because so many schools use this form of assessment and because, at this level, where teams of teachers are often involved in assessment development, assessment literacy is needed by those constructing the assessment and is as important here as it is in the classroom.
- To complicate slightly further, sometimes districts will apply the term *common* in front of the term *benchmark*, yielding a common benchmark assessment. In the end, it's less the name that defines the assessment than its purpose(s) and use of the results.

All this leads to this: capturing all levels and uses precisely would be unmanageable. So your school/district may have other levels, or use other names, in addition to what we have chosen to use in this book as primary examples of the various levels of assessment.

Classroom Assessment

Two aspects of the *classroom* assessment level are worthy of note. The first is that, historically, it has been largely ignored as a school improvement tool. The second is that assessment knowledge and skill are frequently missing from equations that define teacher quality and effectiveness. For decades we have invested heavily in local, state, national, and international standardized testing, followed more recently by increased levels of standardized interim/benchmark testing. During this same period, we have invested relatively little to ensure the quality or effective use of the other 99% of the assessments that happen in students' lives—those conducted day to day with their teacher in their classroom. Yet classroom assessment, specifically formative assessment, has proven its worth in enhancing achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998). For this reason, no assessment system can really be in balance unless the classroom level of assessment is fulfilling its role in supporting and verifying learning.

Second, while classroom-level instructional decisions differ between formative and summative use, the essential assessment conditions remain relatively constant.

Achievement standards must be spelled out from the beginning of instruction in the form of deconstructed, clear, and appropriate learning targets. The learning targets must be reflected in quality assessments that yield dependable information with sufficient precision to reflect how well each student mastered each of the learning targets that lead up to the standards. Teachers and students can then know which standards have yet to be mastered (formative purposes) or the extent to which each student succeeded in meeting requirements (summative purposes). Both are important, but they are different, and effective local assessment systems balance the two. See Figure 1.2 to again review the differences between formative and summative assessment.

Common Assessments

Many schools use the PLC, or professional learning community model. A PLC can take on many forms and purposes suited to local context and need: professional learning, school improvement, school governance, and so on. But to follow the DuFour model and take advantage of combined internal expertise, often teachers at the same grade level or who share the same teaching assignments (secondary department level, for example) collaborate to identify common learning targets over a given period, develop assessments linked to those targets, conduct the assessments across the designated student subgroup, and then process the results together and determine next steps. By doing so they learn, in part, how they can improve their instructional program, which students or groups of students are in need of specific assistance, which standards appear to be most difficult, and so on. The purpose is to improve student learning through team-based instructional improvement across both programs and individual classrooms, using assessments common across classrooms/grade levels to do so.

Interim/Benchmark Assessment

While common assessments are frequently seen generated by teachers at the school level, interim assessments are often associated with a district-level focus, can have either a formative and summative purpose. In the larger picture, results can be aggregated across schools, giving a wider view of district progress, and allowing decision making at both the school and district level.

These assessments are criterion referenced, meaning they test students in relation to a defined set of knowledge and skill and can be used periodically (or simply beginning and end of term) during the quarter or semester to keep track of student progress in mastering each standard. These assessments can serve multiple purposes across three main areas: instruction, evaluation and prediction (Ruiz-Primo, Furtak, Yin, Ayala, & Shavelson, 2010). The primary purpose often is to identify those standards students are struggling to meet and those students struggling the most. This allows teachers to use the results in two ways. First, it provides them the information needed to improve their own instruction aimed at those standards. The focus is on immediate improvement. Second, these results can help teachers and students focus on identifying student strengths and areas needing improvement so they can plan assistance and interventions that overcome problems students may be experiencing individually or collectively. Note that if these are to be used in formative ways (that is, to promote further learning), accountability or grading decisions should not come into play.

There are two caveats here to note:

1. While the next assessment level (annual assessment, discussed next) is usually developed, administered, and scored under the direction of a state department of education, the first three levels described previously are under the direction of local teachers, schools, and districts. From that perspective the quality of those assessments is directly related to the assessment literacy of those developing the assessments and using the results, something that, unlike the state test, local agencies have direct control over.
2. Both common assessments and interim/benchmark assessments can and often are used in formative ways, but unfortunately for many educators these tests have come to be synonymous with, and the extent of, formative assessment. Although assessments at these levels can be beneficial (they can be used, as an example, to predict student performance on the annual accountability assessment), they are not the formative applications described in the research (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). That centers on the classroom, guided by the teacher, involving the students, and is diagnostic, day to day during the learning.

Annual Assessment

When it comes to *annual assessment*, tradition has centered on summative accountability decisions: Did enough students succeed at mastering state standards? Is each school performing and producing successful students as it should be? But going further, in the United States since 2006 and under No Child Left Behind, these tests have resulted in school “report cards,” with the data disaggregated to show how all groups of students are progressing and if at an “adequate” rate. The results are not limited to a single score report: The data is shown by poverty, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency, this to unmask any gaps that may exist between groups of students. Schools that fail to do well fall into some mode of school improvement or correctives, or possibly even restructuring.

But the 2015 PDK/Gallup poll found that public support falling for this level of testing, both regarding the amount of time taken and whether or not a single score aggregated from a year’s instruction should be used to judge schools, teachers, and students. The poll shows further that as a policy toll to improve schools the public prefers improving teacher quality over the use of testing to drive improvement. Still, these tests are not likely to be abandoned soon, and proper use of the results is at the heart of what it means to be assessment literate. Guidance for effective use is available from PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) and Smarter Balance for those states involved with the CCSS.



ACTIVITY 1.1

Formative or Summative?

PURPOSE

Balanced systems blend assessments across multiple levels for both summative and formative purposes, each separated from the other by how the results will be used. Although it is possible for an assessment to be used in both ways, most are best suited for one use

or the other, and in fact are usually designed for that primary use. In this activity participants classify each assessment type listed as either formative or summative.

This activity is a precursor to Activity 2.1, “Conducting an Assessment Audit.” That activity asks teams to build an inventory of assessments being conducted in their school or district and analyze it on a number of levels. Understanding and agreeing on what is and is not formative or summative as practiced in this activity will help you conduct your audit.

TIME

20–30 minutes

MATERIALS NEEDED

None

SUGGESTED ROOM SETUP

No special room arrangements needed

DIRECTIONS

1. Make sure every participant is viewing a copy of Figure 1.4. Give everyone a few minutes to read the column headings across the top of the table and the row headings in the left-hand column. Notice that the right-hand column of the table headed “Is the Use Formative or Summative?” is left blank.
2. After everyone has reviewed the table, discuss each row to determine whether its use is formative or summative. Attempt to reach consensus on each example. If there is disagreement, team members should explain their classification rationale by answering the question, “What is formative/summative about that use?” Remember that many assessments can pull double duty, but for this activity the focus is on the use as given. You may find that some uses you classify as formative may also extend into assessment *for* learning where students are also involved in improving learning.
3. When you have completed your discussions, refer to the authors’ completed form (Figure 1.8) at the end of Part 1. Discuss any differences of opinion.

Figure 1.4 Formative or Summative?

Type of Assessment	What Is the Purpose?	Who Will Use the Information?	How Will It Be Used?	Is the Use Formative or Summative?
State Test	Measure level of achievement on state content standards	State	Determine AYP (adequate yearly progress)	
		District, Teacher Teams	Determine program effectiveness	

(Continued)

Figure 1.4 (Continued)

Type of Assessment	What Is the Purpose?	Who Will Use the Information?	How Will It Be Used?	Is the Use Formative or Summative?
State Test (cont.)	Identify percentage of students meeting performance standards on state content standards	State	Comparison of schools/districts	
		District, Teacher Teams	Develop programs/interventions for groups or individuals	
District Benchmark, Interim, or Common Assessment	Measure level of achievement toward state content standards	District, Teacher Teams	Determine program effectiveness	
		District, Teacher Teams	Identify program needs	
	Identify students needing additional help	District, Teacher Teams, Teachers	Plan interventions for groups or individuals	
Classroom Assessment	Measure level of achievement on learning targets taught	Teachers	Determine report card grade based on how well the student performs	
	Diagnose student strengths and areas needing reteaching	Teacher Teams, Teachers	Revise teaching plans for next year/semester	
			Plan further instruction/differentiate instruction for these students	
		Teachers, Students	Provide feedback to students	
Understand strengths and areas needing work	Students	Self-assess, set goals for further study/work		

Source: Chappuis, Jan, *Seven Strategies of Assessment for Learning*, 1st Ed., © 2010, pp. 7, 22–24. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., New York, New York.



THE BENEFITS OF BALANCE

School leaders affirm that in good schools and districts little is ever done in isolation. A balanced local school district assessment system represents a comprehensive and purposeful approach to assessment in schools today. It is simply an organizational approach to assessment, the same way a curriculum is an organizational construct for learning expectations. But it provides intention and direction in meeting the expanded mission of schools. In doing so, the system finally will

- use the assessment processes and results to cause student learning, not merely report it;
- rely on multiple measures of student learning to inform decisions;
- spell out achievement expectations with more clarity, leading to more focused instruction;
- ensure each assessment at every level is of high quality;
- create an assessment literate instructional staff;
- identify and manage testing redundancies, gaps, and overlaps; and
- quantify the amount of testing students in the district undergo.

In summary, a balanced assessment system relies on assessments from multiple levels that work together in classroom, common, interim/benchmark, and annual contexts to inform decisions that both support and measure student learning success. The questions for leaders and/or leadership teams to answer are, “Are we in balance?” and “Do we have in place an integrated system of assessments that can provide the information needed for all users of assessment results and to help students both succeed and to demonstrate their success?”

You can begin to answer these questions and others regarding the current state of balance in your school/district by completing the School/District Assessment System Self-Evaluation found at the end of Part 2 in Activity 2.5. This is a useful tool to help determine where you stand now relative to assessment balance, quality, and effective use. We recommend if possible using a collaborative team approach to completing this exercise and doing it after you have completed reading this book.

LEARNING TARGETS FOR READERS

By reading this book and using the resources, our hope is to help local school district leadership teams to evaluate the extent to which their system is in balance. Once done, they can then identify what steps need to be taken next. The learning targets for readers of this book are aimed at serving that same purpose. Having now read Part 1, we hope the following targets are more in context and are seen as reachable:

1. Understand the benefits—the power—of balanced local assessment systems designed to serve the full range of purpose for assessment by both supporting and certifying student learning.
2. Understand how to evaluate the level of balance in current district assessment systems and build a balanced system based on quality assessment.

3. Become assessment literate, meaning understand the basic principles of sound assessment and the gathering of dependable information.
4. Know how to provide support to teachers (coaching, professional development, resources, etc.) as they face the challenges of day-to-day classroom assessment.
5. Be able to assist policy makers in understanding principles of sound assessment practice so they can set policies that guide sound practice.

THINKING ABOUT ASSESSMENT: SUPPORT RESOURCES FOR PART 1

The following resources that relate directly to the content presented in Part 1 are intended to either deepen understanding or assist leaders in implementing a balanced assessment system.



ACTIVITY 1.2

Embracing the Vision of a Standards-Based School

PURPOSE

Embracing the vision of a standards-based school might be difficult for some, both staff members and others in the community. In most adults' student experience, moving to the next grade was based on seat time and doing passing work on tests and activities in the subject areas. In a standards-based school, student success is contingent on mastering a set of standards that progress through the grades until students reach mastery on the standards for graduation in various content areas. In this activity, leaders consider what it will take to help all members of the school system adopt a universal vision of standards-based schooling.

TIME

30 minutes

MATERIALS NEEDED

Materials to record the discussion

SUGGESTED ROOM SETUP

Tables and chairs for easy discussion among participants

DIRECTIONS

As leaders, determine what talking points to share with teachers, parents, and the community to help them understand what a standards-based school is and what it means for the students who attend it, for the adults who work in it, and for the parents and the community who support it. Considering the following questions will assist you:

- What is a standards-based school, and how is it the same and different from the schools of our past?
- If mastery of the standards that progress to graduation is necessary for our students, what implications does this have for the following:
 - The written curriculum that is developed
 - The use of the written curriculum in the classrooms
 - The assessments that are developed and used
 - The instruction used with students
 - Reporting and grading students' learning
 - Hiring new teachers
 - Evaluating teaching
 - Determining needed professional development
 - Determining when a student progresses to the next level of standards
 - The assistance provided to students who have difficulty progressing
- Noting the implications, what beliefs that people currently have about their schools will have to be addressed?
- Noting the implications, what professional development, new learning, or other processes will be necessary to embrace this new vision of a standards-based school?
 - By the students
 - By the teachers
 - By the parents
 - By the community
 - By you as leaders



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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.

(Continued)

Figure 1.5 (Continued)

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?

(Continued)

Figure 1.6 (Continued)

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 competence* refers to the consistent practice of high-quality student involved classroom assessment principles in ways that improve student learning. When we possess assessment competence, 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 competence. 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.

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

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?



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NOTE

Figure 1.4 is the figure used in Activity 1.1, “Formative or Summative?” In Figure 1.8 on the next page, we have provided our own responses in the far right-hand column.

Figure 1.8 Formative or Summative?

Type of Assessment	What Is the Purpose?	Who Will Use the Information?	How Will It Be Used?	Is the Use Formative or Summative?
State Test	Measure level of achievement on state content standards	State	Determine AYP (adequate yearly progress)	Summative
		District, Teacher Teams	Determine program effectiveness	Summative
	Identify percentage of students meeting performance standards on state content standards	State	Comparison of schools/districts	Summative
		District, Teacher Teams	Develop programs/interventions for groups or individuals	Formative
District Benchmark, Interim, or Common Assessment	Measure level of achievement toward state content standards	District, Teacher Teams	Determine program effectiveness	Summative
		District, Teacher Teams	Identify program needs	Formative
	Identify students needing additional help	District, Teacher Teams, Teachers	Plan interventions for groups or individuals	Formative
Classroom Assessment	Measure level of achievement on learning targets taught	Teachers	Determine report card grade	Summative
	Diagnose student strengths and areas needing reteaching	Teacher Teams, Teachers	Revise teaching plans for next year/semester	Formative
			Plan further instruction/differentiate instruction for these students	Formative: Assessment for Learning
	Understand strengths and areas needing work	Teachers, Students	Provide feedback to students	Formative: Assessment for Learning
Students		Self-assess, set goals for further study/work	Formative: Assessment for Learning	

Source: Chappuis, Jan, *Seven Strategies of Assessment for Learning*, 1st Ed., © 2010, pp. 7, 22–24. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., New York, New York.