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Assessment

Classroom assessment provides one of the most essential tools a teacher needs in order to run a reflective and educationally beneficial classroom. The results provided from properly administered student assessment allow teachers to determine which students comprehend learning objectives and which students are falling behind, “classroom assessments are an important tool for providing feedback to students so they can adjust their learning; they also help teachers to identify student misconceptions and to modify their instruction accordingly” (NRC 1). Assessment within the classroom provides the only legitimate means for determining the successes or shortcomings of a lesson, the level of understanding of individual students, and the direction the class should take from that point forward.

In general, there are two traditional classifications for assessment within the classroom, formative and summative. Formative assessments take place during a lesson or unit and function as an indicator of where the students are at with the material. These assessments help the teacher answer questions like “Do I need to slow down or speed up with this unit?” “Are there specific concepts that everyone seems to be having trouble with so far?” “Does this material seem like review for most of the students?” And so on. Unfortunately, with today’s heavy focus on standardized and external testing, the time for extensive formative assessments is often not available. “It is generally acknowledged

that increased use of formative assessment...leads to higher quality learning, it is often claimed that the pressure in schools to improve the results achieved by students in externally-set tests and examinations precludes its use” (Wiliam, et. al 49). While the time constraints on using formative assessment may be great in some situations, research shows that its additional use is actually beneficial for students and improves scores and standings on the aforementioned exams (Wiliam, et. al 63).

Summative assessment, on the other hand, generally takes place at the end of a lesson or unit and oftentimes takes the form of a unit test or exam. The goal of a summative assessment is to provide the teacher with an idea of how well each student came to understand the material from that unit. The difficulty that arises with summative assessments is that, more often than not, the same assessment type is given to all students, despite the fact that some may better demonstrate their understanding of a topic through differing means of presentation (such as a portfolio, a multimedia presentation, or a research paper). Therefore, it is important for teachers to keep in mind that while a student may have performed poorly on a multiple-choice exam, their understanding of a topic may be far greater if given an alternative means to demonstrate their knowledge.

When creating a classroom assessment, there are two criteria that must be kept in mind; validity and reliability. “In general terms, validity is the extent to which the information obtained from an assessment instrument or method enables you to accomplish the purpose for which the information was collected. In terms of classroom assessment, the purpose is to inform a decision” (Anderson 11). For example, when a teacher examines the test scores from a unit exam, do they show him or her which

students are mastering the concepts? Can he or she use this information to make a decision about how to proceed? If so, then this assessment can be considered valid.

However, creating a valid assessment is not always an easy task. Using mass produced assessment tools such as worksheets and chapter reviews may work in some instances with some students, but in order for a teacher's assessments to be valid for all students some tailoring and modifying may be needed. Students with special needs, ELL students, and students who do not perform well with traditional assessment methods may need a different form assessment to show they are learning. This can, however, be a time consuming task and in no way is it practical for a teacher to devise a unique set of assessments for each student and for each activity. Therefore, teachers must reach a compromise between using a variety of assessment methods to ensure validity and what is practical within the time constraints of today's classroom.

While validity deals with the usefulness of the information obtained from an assessment, "reliability is the consistency of the information obtained from one or more assessments. Some writers equate reliability with dependability, which conjures up a common-sense meaning of the term" (Anderson 12). For example, imagine a teacher who gives his or her students 3 different assessments at the end of a unit. The results from the first assessment show that all of the students are failing. The second assessment shows that all the students are performing at an average level. Finally, the third assessment shows that all of the students are performing at an exceptional level. While all these assessments were designed to test for the same knowledge, they provided inconsistent results and would therefore not be considered reliable.

Unfortunately, the opportunity for teachers to use multiple assessments to determine the reliability of a lesson or unit is often a rarity as instructors are in a constant struggle to cover the material that is required of them, let alone have time to reassess that material using various methods. However, if students can be presented with a variety of formative assessment types throughout the course of a unit and be exposed to several types of summative assessments (such as a unit test and a multimedia project), then the reliability of a particular lesson can be more accurately determined.

In order to improve the reliability and validity of assessments, teachers must have a clear idea of what information they want to assess and how they will go about assessing it. Assembling a multiple-choice test from an exam generator may not be the best way to assess students' understanding of the water cycle; it might be more effective to have them create a poster that illustrates the cycle's key components. There are often times when giving students a choice in assessment methods, as is often the case when using a differentiated instruction model, can be a relatively simple way to improve upon reliability and validity. Using this model, students tend to feel more, "empowered by being given choices...comfortable with their decisions concerning product type and working groups, and...in control of the assessment process" (Waters, et. al 97). When given a choice, students can select the style of assessment they feel best suits their learning style which, in turn, can then lead to an improvement in the reliability and validity of the assessment.

Finally, teachers must always remember to deliver the results of classroom assessments to the students in a timely, considerate, and understandable manner. "If we use test scores to convey results and the [students] don't understand how the score

connects to learning or if we use symbols such as letter grades on a report card when [students] have a different idea what those symbols mean, we communicate ineffectively” (Stiggins et. Al 17). Teachers must focus on providing prompt, accurate, and meaningful feedback so that students are aware of their standing in the class, what concepts they have a grasp of, and what material they still need to learn. Additionally, teachers need to spend time in reflection over student assessment to determine what areas may need to be re-taught, what topics could be shortened or lengthened for the next round, what misconceptions students may still have, and how to best lead the students from their current level of understanding into the next unit.

Works Cited

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