Making the Most of Assessments to Inform Instruction

Victoria J. Risko, Vanderbilt University
Doris Walker-Dalhouse, Marquette University
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Assessing students’ performance while teaching to guide instruction is a longstanding practice of classroom teachers and reading specialists. Classroom-based assessments are at the heart of differentiated instruction and RTI. When used appropriately, these assessments are highly effective for influencing student learning.

Assessments can transform instruction by providing timely information that captures students’ strengths, needs, and specific instructional history. Because of their timeliness and representation of specific student data, assessments are far preferable to pacing guides that require every teacher and student to be on the same page at the same time or scripted materials that provide arbitrary instructional sequences that are not responsive to the needs of the particular classroom, teacher or student (Peverini, 2009).

Given their potential for a positive influence on instruction, classroom-based assessments must be credible – they can be trusted – and usable – they are relevant to specific instructional goals. Researchers suggest that educators can maximize their potential in at least three ways:

**Assess More than Single Skills**

Teachers and reading specialists need to go beyond narrow curriculum guides to develop assessments of the wide range of literacy skills and strategies that students are expected to learn. In addition, researchers suggested that assessments include open-ended formats that focus on how students apply their skills and strategies in combination when reading and interpreting texts (National Research Council, 2001).

**Use Formative Assessments**

Formative assessments, in general, are those that provide information about student learning during instruction. The criteria for establishing credible formative assessments require careful planning and deliberate teacher actions to determine:

- What should be measured
- How it should be measured
- How frequently it should be measured
- What adjustments need to be made to instruction

Each assessment should link directly to instructional objectives, so often, commercial forms of formative assessments don’t meet the essential criteria (Cech, 2008).

When teachers use formative assessments to guide their instruction, students made gains

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that were considered large and meaningful. Good results are also reported when students are involved in the formative assessment process. When engaged in collaborative assessments, students learn new strategies and adjust their approach to literacy tasks, especially when assessments are used for providing feedback and guidance.

Design Multimodal Assessments

Classroom assessments should represent the multimodal ways students engage in literacy, both in and out of school. There is a need to rethink assessment because of changing texts and audiences in the New Media Age and greater demands for considering how students are interacting with a wide range of texts (Silva, 2008; Stornaiuolo, Hull, & Nelson, 2009). For example, digital storytelling is becoming more widely used in classrooms to assess and strengthen students’ critical thinking, media literacy skills, report writing, and content knowledge in specific disciplines.

Multimodal assessments are also effective for assessing ELLs (Lenski, et al., 2006). Assessments that invite multiple modes for students to represent their literacy knowledge are recommended. Among the numerous modes for representing knowledge are students’ drawings, use of graphic organizers, gestures, use of computers, and oral explanations to could be supported with discussion groups and in collaboration with peers (Iddings, Risko & Rampulla, 2009).

Credible use of classroom-based assessments relies on the teacher’s ability to design assessments based on instructional goals, systematic and frequent gathering of data, and direct applications to instructional adjustments as necessary. Teachers are urged to move gradually into developing assessments that are multidimensional, formative and authentic as they identify the best fit with their teaching goals and the goals they have for their students.

Now is the time to join!

There has never been a better time to renew or join the Portland Reading Council. A yearly membership is $25, but if you join with a friend, each of you pays only $15 for a full year!

Benefits of Membership:

- Dual membership in the Portland Reading Council and the Oregon Reading Association.
- An invaluable Membership ListServ with classroom teaching ideas, literacy resources and information on upcoming events.
- The Reading Forecaster and the ORAcle -- two informative newsletters published three times per year.
- Participation in Council events such as book clubs, literacy happy hours, Celebrate Literacy, literacy grants, and more.
- Access to professional resources and videos from the Lending Library.
- Discounts on registration for local, high-quality literacy events, workshops and the annual state literacy conference.

Membership dues have never been so affordable. Find a friend and renew your membership or join the Portland Reading Council!

For more information, click here to get a membership form: http://pcira.files.wordpress.com/2008/10/join-ora-pcira-15.pdf or contact Penny Plavala at pplavala@mesd.k12.or.us.
President’s Message:
Assessment—What is it good for?

Nathan Traller
5th grade teacher, Bonny Slope Elementary School

About five years ago my teaching world was upended with some radical ideas that challenged the way I had been assessing my students. Rick Stiggins laid out the historical background of the American education system and its role as a great "sorting machine" in previous decades. We then examined our own experiences as students receiving cryptic letter grades with little to guide us but crossed fingers until we figured out what the teacher “wanted”. Then Stiggins delivered the knockout blow – assessment could actually enhance learning, not simply measure it. Research shows that when students have a clear picture of where they are and know where to go next, their learning accelerates. I took a horrified look at many of my quizzes and grading practices. Was I even clear myself what the "next step" was for each of my students? Suddenly Marzano’s recommendation about posting learning targets became less an authoritarian edict and more an empowering tool for my students. In a daze, I rolled up my sleeves.

I have been slowly walking a new path ever since. It is a path that has led to more custom-built rubrics, careful consideration of how to put things in student-friendly terms, and scrutiny over what is most important to teach. My journey is far from flawless, but I have tasted the success of students "knowing where to aim next". It is worth it for the sense of ownership alone and has made conferencing with students and parents so much more purposeful.

The latest twist in my development is my involvement in an International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program Elementary School with an overarching focus on inquiry. How do I square explicit learning targets with students uncovering content and allowing their questions to guide the units? It has turned out to be easier to achieve than I first envisioned! Sometimes as a class we create our own rubrics after we have analyzed mentor texts for writing and uncovered the key traits that the “pros” use. My assessments still need to thoughtfully match the learning and be "student-friendly" and informative, which is a "work-in-progress" with my grade-level colleagues. I am much more critical – Did this assessment task really do what I was hoping it would? Did students go off on an unexpected path?

What does literacy assessment look like? I am still searching for that perfect blend of what I need. As a Beaverton elementary teacher, I give the DRA II twice yearly to all students, with a midyear session for at-risk readers. Our building utilizes DIBELS as a narrow indicator of one aspect of reading fluency. I create my own classroom-based assessment tasks that let me know how students are comprehending and using strategies with texts. We have created rubrics that help us rate our proficiency with using text evidence to support our opinions. Reading responses give me a view into each student’s thinking. Conferring one on one with readers has become indispensable if not frustrating when I let time management to get the better of me! I try to think of each aspect of reading and what I can do to get information on how my students are doing. The next step is communicating that information in a way my students can understand. I like to think that their view of reading and what it involves expands when they are with me. Of course, just like you the waves of OAKS rock our happy canoe, leaving me seasick as it tests only a portion of what we work on in a format that looks far different from the reading we do most of the year. Yet for all the extra effort, it is the assessments "for learning” that pay off best for my class!
A Primer on Assessments
Becky Bard, Literacy Specialist, Deer Creek Elementary

If you stop and think about all the forms of assessment that are available to you on a daily basis, you will realize that you are assessing constantly. You are always monitoring and adjusting your instruction to best meet the needs of your diverse student population. But what exactly are the assessments that teachers are using?

**Screening Assessments** are designed to give baseline information about your students and help identify students who may be at risk. Screening assessments, like DIBELS, PALS, or core program placement tests, are like thermometers – they can tell you if someone has a fever, but they don’t necessarily tell you why.

**Diagnostic Assessments** are the ones designed to figure out exactly what the issues are with a student who was shown to be at risk using a screening assessment. These are typically more in-depth – providing the cause behind your student’s fever.

**Progress Monitoring Assessments** are regularly scheduled, consistent probes to measure if students are making adequate progress. These allow you to track growth on a particular skill and are done on weekly, biweekly or monthly basis. Designed to be quick to administer, progress monitoring assessments check to see if your student’s fever is under control.

**Outcome or Summative Assessments** are used to measure mastery at the end of a unit or the end of the year. Assessments such as the unit tests in your core programs or OAKS are designed to see if your students have met certain benchmarks and goals. Essentially, summative assessments are designed to see if your student’s fever has been cured.

**What Is a Formative Assessment??**

“Formative” assessments are any assessments that inform your instruction. So really, a formative assessment is defined by how you use your data, not by what assessment is used. Formative assessment is something you do every day and had no idea that it had a real name.

When you are teaching, you are constantly monitoring and adjusting in order to check for understanding and fill in where it seems weak. A formative assessment is directly related to what you are teaching, and so YOU get to decide what form it takes.

A true formative assessment should blend seamlessly into your classroom instruction. In fact, formative assessments should look like students practicing new skills and teachers adapting instruction to meet needs. With formative assessments, you are checking on your student’s fever, giving a little medicine, and seeing if it is having any effect – right there in the middle of your teaching.

There really is no point in assessing your students if you are not using the information you are gaining to help inform your instruction. Here are four principles of assessment that may help guide you to providing the best classroom-based assessments:

- They must help children learn more effectively.
- They must help teachers teach more effectively.
- They must help teachers articulate their understandings of their students to external audiences.
- They must be efficient so the interruption to teaching and learning is as minimal as possible.

Assessments can transform your instruction. As long as you’re spending the time to do them, you might as well use them to your advantage as a teacher!
Transform Your Teaching Using Assessments to Inform Instruction

Chrissy Lawrence, Instructional Coach, Sherwood School District

When I first started teaching over 15 years ago, I remember giving each student in my class a running record in the fall, winter and spring. This was simply a laminated “grade-level” passage that the students read out loud to see if their fluency rate improved throughout the year. The only other purpose of this was to place the students in leveled reading groups according to how fast and accurately they could read this passage. To think back on this, I realize that there was no clear purpose to this practice.

An assessment is used to collect data, but it’s what you do with the data that turns it into a powerful teaching tool. When we analyze, interpret and reflect on this data, we can better inform our instruction and target the individual needs of each student. At Edy Ridge Elementary School where I am an instructional coach, teachers are encouraged to give their students multiple IRIs (Informal Reading Inventory) throughout the year. This type of assessment is comprehensive and can measure accuracy, fluency and comprehension.

Once the assessment has been administered, the real work starts. It is analyzed to find out what the reader already knows, what they attended to and where extra support is needed. I have created a “strategy/skill” matrix to be used in conjunction with the many literacy assessments given (QRI, DIBELS, LRPA, DRA, etc.). After analyzing the errors and comprehension prompts, the teacher marks the area of concern on the matrix (i.e. vowel sounds, inferring, phrasing, summarizing, etc.). This matrix is then used to create strategy groups where the students are all working on the same skill or to targeted instruction. It’s a wonderful accountability tool that can transform your teaching.

If you’re interested in the matrices we use, click below to see

- **comprehension**: [http://pcira.files.wordpress.com/2008/10/strategy-group-matrix-comprehension.pdf](http://pcira.files.wordpress.com/2008/10/strategy-group-matrix-comprehension.pdf)

The administration of a running record can capture a path of progress, but the analysis of this assessment is where the real teaching begins.

A Middle School Journey of Assessment for Learning

Amy Whitney, Instructional Coach, George Middle School

One of the major struggles that middle schools students and teachers face is that by the time students get to middle school they have already formed opinions of themselves as learners. They either believe they can learn and achieve or they don’t. Our school is predominantly these non-believers. Based on the research (Black & William, 1998), we decided that assessment for learning is what will make the greatest gains for our lowest performing students, but will also raise achievement overall.

Rick Stiggins says, “Students can hit any target they can see and which stands still for them.” We believe that starting with clear targets of learning is the most important first step in assessment for learning. Giving students learning-based goals – “I can multiply and divide fractions” – as opposed to performance based-goals – “I can finish the fractions worksheet” – helps students to focus on where they are going, where they are now, and how they can close the gap.

We have just started our work with assessment for learning. Teachers are writing clear learning targets everyday, and they are linking those targets to the formative and summative assessments. Soon, we will be working on giving feedback to students and engaging them in the assessment process.
Finding Benefits in a Standards-Based Grading System

Susan Payne, Instructional Coach, Tualatin High School

One of the biggest challenges at the secondary level is that assessment and grading are so closely linked that some teachers have a hard time separating them; often assessments that are formative in nature end up in the grade book. It is common practice for teachers to combine grades for learning activities such as homework with summative assessments like projects and tests to determine an overall average grade. This system can skew the student’s grade so that it is often more reflective of student behaviors such as organization and timeliness rather than providing an accurate reflection of what students know and can do at the end of a unit of instruction.

A core group of teachers at Tualatin High School, including four Language Arts teachers, have begun to use a standards-based grading system so that students’ grades more accurately reflect their academic knowledge and skills. In this system, teachers use rubrics that are directly tied to the priority standards that have been identified for each grade level in order to assess each student’s level of proficiency.

Tracking student progress on specific standards across a period of time has been both enlightening and rewarding, according to Sophomore Language Arts teacher Theresa McCaffrey. “One of the best things about switching to this system is that my grade book has become a source of information for where I need to focus my instruction,” she says. “It’s not just a record of a series of discrete assignments. Instead I am able to establish that individual students are demonstrating growth, or if they’re not, I can plan lessons to address specific areas of need.” Deciding where to focus and what or whom to re-teach can be determined easily by looking at trend data on a specific standard for a whole class.

Another plus to this system is the use of a common rubric for each standard, which provides the opportunity to calibrate scores by collaboratively scoring assessments with other teachers. “It was really helpful to compare my scores to someone else’s and then to have the conversation about why they might be different,” says Lori DuPuis, who is piloting standards-based grading in her Freshman English classes. “It helped me to be more consistent.”

By using the same rubric and coming to agreement about what “proficient” looks like, teachers end up with assessments that are more reliable and grades that are more meaningful, not only for teachers, but for students and parents, as well.
TAR Book Study Group Looks at Assessment

Susan Payne, Instructional Coach, Tualatin High School

At Tualatin High School, teachers who have already made the switch to a standards-based grading system, as well as some who are considering it for next year, have the opportunity to share successes and challenges with each other as members of a monthly book study group. This year, the group is reading Ken O’Connor’s How to Grade for Learning, a book that they have found affirming in that O’Connor outlines the drawbacks of traditional grading systems, as well as helpful in that he offers concrete solutions for implementation of an alternative approach. Several teachers will be receiving graduate credit from PSU for their participation in the study group. This book group was made possible by the Teachers as Readers program, sponsored by the Portland Reading Council.

If you are looking to start a Teachers As Readers book group in your school, here are some excellent books for you and your colleagues to explore:

Transformative Assessment
W. James Popham (ASCD, 2008)
This book clarifies what formative assessment really is, why it is right for your school or classroom, and how to use this approach to improve teaching, learning, classroom climate, teacher professional development, and school performance.

Checking for Understanding: Formative Assessment Techniques for Your Classroom
Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (ASCD, 2007)
Extensive classroom examples show you how to use formative assessments to correct misconceptions, improve learning, and model good study skills for individual students or across multiple classrooms.

Elements of Grading: A Guide to Effective Practice
Douglas Reeves (Solution Tree, 2011)
Author Douglas Reeves argues that grades must meet four essential criteria – accuracy, fairness, specificity, and timeliness. The book includes examples, case studies, and opportunities for reflection to facilitate individual and school-wide examinations of grading policies.

Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing It Right – Using It Well
Richard J. Stiggins, Judith A. Arter, Jan Chappuis, Stephen Chappuis (Allyn & Bacon; Pap/Com/Dv edition, 2009)
This resource is grounded in research that shows student motivation and learning can improve through the use of student-involved classroom assessment.
Looking for More?

Interested in finding out more about how you can use assessments to inform your instruction? Start out by taking a look at some of these excellent resources!

Websites

**Assessment Training Institute: Your Resource for Classroom Assessment for Learning**

*Resource center includes links to study guides, articles, webinars, and more.*

http://www.assessmentinst.com/ati-resource-center/?action=register

**National Middle School Association**

*Downloadable assessment resources, including podcasts*

http://www.nmsa.org/Publications/WebExclusive/Assessment/tabid/1120/Default.aspx

**Teachers.TV**

*Formative Assessment video featuring Professor Paul Black*


**Reading Rockets**

*Types of Informal Classroom-Based Assessments to use in Elementary Classrooms*

http://www.readingrockets.org/article/3412

**Reading Rockets**

*Informal reading assessments, resources and videos for Elementary Teachers*

http://www.readingrockets.org/teaching/reading101/assessment

Articles

“What Student Writing Can Teach Us” in *Educational Leadership*:

http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/dec07/vol65/num04/What-Student-Writing-Can-Teach-Us.aspx

“The Best Value in Formative Assessment” in *Educational Leadership*:


Link to entire issue of *Educational Leadership* (where above articles appeared) entitled “Informative Assessment”:

http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/dec07/vol65/num04/toc.aspx
Ask Penny

by Penny Plavala, School Improvement Specialist, Multnomah ESD

Dear Penny,

I am looking for a high school level formative reading assessment I can use with my students to gauge their skills throughout the year as an alternative to a multiple choice test. Any ideas?

Paul in Portland

Dear Paul,

I have a good idea for you. Last year ODE developed a reading work sample assessment as an alternative way for high school students to meet the Essential Skill of Reading – which will be a graduation requirement in 2012 and beyond.

Reading work samples are created using high-interest fiction and nonfiction text appropriate for high school students. Across the state, classroom teachers, ESD and district literacy specialists, and instructional coaches are creating reading work samples to use in the classroom as practice opportunities so students become familiar with the format and expectations.

At the Multnomah ESD, we have created a website that provides a collection of these practice reading work samples along with the state scoring guides and additional resources. http://www.mesd.k12.or.us/si/ReadingWorkSamples/

In your classroom, you can use the practice reading work samples with your students. Have them read through it, answer the prompts, and then discuss the various types of reading skills being assessed: Demonstrate Understanding, Develop an Interpretation, and Analyze Text. Use the scoring guide to assess comprehension skills and to provide feedback.

The results of this formative assessment will give you great information as you plan further instruction in reading to boost your students’ skills.

Penny
Portland Reading Council Members Receive Literacy Grants

Each year, the Oregon Reading Association awards $200 grants to council members who have innovative, creative projects that support literacy. The Portland Reading Council congratulates these members who received grants to support their projects.

Christy Shaver, Tigard-Tualatin School District – “Book Nook Fund”

The grant will purchase newer, high-interest, popular books for the Book Nook, which offers students the opportunity to “shop” for a new or gently used book to add to their home library. The privilege is given to students who are “caught reading” as part of a school-wide behavior support program. About 20 - 40 students per week get books!

Rebecca Bard, Tigard-Tualatin School District – “DC on Wheels”

This literacy specialist loads her van with books and brings them to lower-income housing areas to give away to students throughout the summer, getting volunteer donations and help. This will be the second summer of the program. Grant money will be used to purchase popular high-interest books. See project photos below.

Margie Lawler, Portland Public Schools – “Read Around the World”

The grant will purchase books and other current resources to help students make connections with and learn about the places they study when preparing for the “Passport Club Check Days”, a geography program for all 2nd to 8th graders involving students and their families.


Reader’s theater scripts will be purchased to be laminated and housed in the school media center for 550 students at Butler Creek Elementary to help struggling readers become motivated, fluent readers through repeated readings as they practice to perform. This is part of a plan designed by teachers to improve their students’ fluency.

Joan Flora, Canby School District – “Picture Books”

The grant will purchase picture books that 9th and 10th grade reluctant readers practice by reading multiple times, then record as digital books for 1st to 3rd graders. The high school students create and record via Garage Band on the computers, including sound effects and music. The high school students package their product, then visit the elementary children and provide time for listening to the books and having discussion. This project involves about 135 high school students and 200 1st, 2nd, and 3rd graders.
African American Read-In

Adults and children alike attended the 15th Annual African American Read-In on Sunday, February 13th, at the Hagen Center on the campus of Concordia University. Students, local celebrities and community leaders read from works by their favorite African American writers. It truly was an afternoon that reminded everyone that African American literature is for everyone! The African American Read-In is an annual event co-sponsored by the North Portland Library, Concordia University, the Oregon Alliance of Black School Educators and the Portland Reading Council.
Literacy Shout-Outs

This year, the Portland Reading Council began a program of recognizing local educators with a Literacy Shout-Out. This award goes to people just like you who are dedicating themselves to improving literacy education throughout the Portland Metro area. This month, we congratulate the following people and thank them for their dedication.

**Pam Stearns, 6th grade teacher**  
*Mt. Pleasant Elementary School, Oregon City School District*  
For providing students an opportunity to succeed in literacy through small group and individualized reading experiences for 25-30 extra minutes each day.

**Natalie Wolf, 4th grade teacher**  
*Kelly Creek Elementary, Gresham-Barlow School District*  
For sharing creative mini-lessons to boost the skills of your student writers, and for creating a safe and caring writing environment in your classroom.

**Terri Cummings, Science Teacher**  
*Canby High School, Canby School District*  
For providing rich and creative vocabulary activities and instruction for your students.

**Caroline Hay, ELL / Social Studies Teacher**  
*Tualatin High School, Tigard-Tualatin School District*  
For building literacy skills in both English and Spanish for your students at Tualatin High School.

**Lori DuPuis, Language Arts Teacher**  
*Tualatin High School, Tigard-Tualatin School District*  
For refining the 9th grade curriculum, identifying priority standards, and developing proficiency-based assessments and grading systems.

**Arzi Shinn, Reading Assistant**  
**Pam Porcello, Reading Assistant**  
**Jami Redding, Reading Assistant**  
**Susan Johnson, Reading Assistant**  
**Debbie Mansfield, Reading Assistant**  
*Deer Creek Elementary, Tigard-Tualatin School District*  
For dedicated and inspiring work in teaching students to read each day.

**Laura Jones, Librarian**  
*Kelly Elementary, Portland Public Schools*  
For promoting reading by gathering books for your students to take home over the summer break.

**Jacque Kraxberger, Library Assistant**  
*Knight Elementary, Canby School District*  
For encouraging children to get “hooked on books” through the literacy displays and activities in your beautiful library.
Announcing the Annual

Celebrate Literacy Awards

Do You Know an Outstanding Literacy Educator?

The Portland Reading Council is seeking your nominations for individuals who demonstrate the following qualities:

- Dedication to promoting literacy
- Lifelong love of reading which is instilled in others
- Significant contributions to literacy at the local level

Award winners will be honored at a ceremony in the spring.

To nominate an outstanding literacy educator, please fill out the following information and complete a one-page nomination letter.

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Please attach a one-page, one-sided document in no less than 12 point font that clearly describes how your nominee demonstrates the qualities listed above.

Questions? Please email Rene’ Dernbach at mdernbach@comcast.net

* Please fax both the completed form and one-page letter by March 28, 2011 to: Penny Plavala 503-257-1650 or email to: mdernbach@comcast.net

Access the Nomination Form online here: http://pcira.wordpress.com
**Portland Reading Council Board Members**

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**Portland Reading Council**

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A local council of the Oregon Reading Association and affiliate of the International Reading Association

For more information, contact Nathan Traller  
nathan_traller@beavton.k12.or.us


Find us on Facebook!

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**Upcoming Events**

**Urgency & School Change Conference**

March 9 – 11  
Seattle, WA

[www.urgencyandschoolchange.com](http://www.urgencyandschoolchange.com)

**It’s All About Comprehension (K – 3) with Sharon Taberski**

March 10  
Portland, OR


**Teaching Struggling Readers in the 21st Century with Kylene Beers and Robert Probst: Grades 4 - 10**

March 31  
Portland, OR


**Professional Learning Teams with Rick & Rebecca DuFour**

April 7 – 8  
Portland, OR

[www.cosa.k12.or.us](http://www.cosa.k12.or.us)

**Lecture Series: Meet Students with Dyslexia**

May 10  
Portland, OR

[www.orbida.org](http://www.orbida.org)