

Getting Started

It can be difficult to fully integrate assessment *for* learning into a classroom setting without the support of your school and fellow teachers. If you are enthusiastic about assessment *for* learning and are looking for ways to introduce and involve your peers, go to the "[Resources for Leaders](#)" section of this website, which has suggestions for schools and entire districts to get involved.

Whether or not you have much peer support there are ways to start making classroom assessment work for your students immediately. While we find that it generally takes from 2-4 years of progressive involvement to integrate, a few simple changes can begin to make a difference for your students now.

The main thing to remember is that students learn more when three conditions are met:

1. as teachers find more ways to involve students in the assessment process
2. as teachers increase the amount of specific descriptive feedback
3. as teachers decrease the amount of evaluative feedback

1. Involve Students in Assessment Process

Ok, take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

In a hurried, harried school environment, is it possible to give students the time and tools to get involved in their own assessment process? Our experience and the findings of many researchers suggest that it is not only possible, it is essential.

Students learn best when they receive frequent feedback which gives them the opportunity to understand what they need to adjust in order to meet their learning goals.

They need time to think, to talk with others, to make mistakes (and not be penalized for them), to explain and perhaps defend their choices, to try alternate approaches, and finally, to apply their increasing knowledge in new

situations. The more involved they are, the better they do!

Working with the student to help them learn how to reach a learning goal is, as described by one teacher, "**being on the student's side against the task rather than being on the task's side against the student.**"

Think about that for a second! In the past, students would be penalized if they did not measure up to a standard. Assessment *for* learning ensures that the student is not judged, but encouraged and supported.

Remember, the Latin root behind the word assessment means "to sit beside."

2. Increase Descriptive Feedback

A second foundational truth demonstrated by current research is that descriptive feedback helps students learn more. This may seem obvious, but it actually goes against common educational practices where "the test" is often used as the primary means of feedback.

Testing is an example of evaluative feedback, whereas descriptive feedback is used to explain what is working and what is not as students progress towards their learning goals.

Descriptive feedback should be specific, easy to understand, part of an ongoing conversation, and used in comparison to samples and exemplars.

One of the biggest challenges for teachers is finding enough time to give individual students enough quality descriptive feedback. By teaching the students how to compare their own work and that of their peers to models, exemplars, and samples of quality, the teacher actually multiplies descriptive feedback using two other sources – self-assessment and peer-assessment.

3. Decrease Evaluative Feedback

It seems counterintuitive to suggest that decreasing any form of feedback will actually help increase learning, but this is precisely what research has been demonstrating – evaluative feedback can actually demotivate students from learning. As Dylan Wiliam remarked: "**Grades cause an emotional**

reaction – either positive or negative. Feedback causes you to think and engage, which is reflective learning."

Speaking generally, when male students receive negative evaluations, they tend to blame the school, the test, or the teacher: "The system is stupid." When female students receive negative evaluations, they tend to blame themselves: "I am stupid."

In both cases, however, most students experience negative emotions and a sense of failure and are, in fact, discouraged from trying harder. The negative evaluation launches them on a downward spiral.

"Evaluative feedback tells the learner how she or he has performed compared to others (norm-referenced assessment) or what was to be learned (criterion-referenced assessment). Evaluative feedback is often reported using letters, numbers, checks, or other symbols. Because evaluative feedback has commonly been encoded, students usually understand whether or not they need to improve. But unless descriptive feedback is also provided, students do not have enough information to understand what they need to do in order to improve." (Copyright, Anne Davies – *Making Classroom Assessment Work* (2000) – p.13.)