



Assessment in a Differentiated Classroom

Carol Ann Tomlinson and Tonya Moon

*Assessment at every stage of instruction can help teachers match teaching and learning plans to students' learning needs. **Carol Ann Tomlinson and Tonya Moon** explain.*

Architects are advisers in the building process, making a complex system manageable by formulating critical decisions, setting quantifiable results, and working closely with others while encouraging colleagues to employ the industry's best practices. The role of the teacher is not dissimilar. The teacher, too, works in a complex system serving as a change agent for students. An effective teacher makes the curriculum (the “what” of teaching) accessible through appropriate instructional practices (the “how” of teaching).

The teacher's role is made more complex by the reality of student diversity in readiness to learn, language, economic background, culture, motivation, interests, approach to learning, and so on. How well the teacher serves as a change agent for the full range of students in the complex system we call a classroom is both measured and informed by persistent use of assessment. In a differentiated classroom, generation and use of data to inform instruction, as well as to measure the effectiveness of instruction, is a core part of the instructional cycle and is critical to the success of both teacher and students.

The collection and use of assessment data to support differentiation occurs in three stages:

- Planning for instruction, including pre-assessment
- Implementing instruction, including formative assessment
- Evaluating instruction, including summative assessment

Stage I: Planning for Instruction, Including Pre-Assessment

Know, Understand, and Be Able to Do

Fundamental to the success of the teaching and learning process is a teacher's clarity about what students must know, understand, and be able to do (KUD) as the result of each segment of learning. KUDs provide teacher and students with clarity about learning targets and also facilitate alignment of teaching, learning, assessment, and differentiation. KUDs should provide a framework that engages learners and promotes their understanding of key content. Engagement is essential for sustained student motivation. Understanding is critical for student retention, application, and transfer of what they learn. KUDs also provide parameters for differentiation because the goal is rarely different content for different learners but rather different approaches to, and support systems for, mastering required content.

Pre-Assessments

With KUDs clearly established, teachers can create pre-assessments that measure a student's current status with target KUDs and critical prerequisites that teachers might otherwise assume students bring to class from past school experiences. Pre-assessment can also expose students' misconceptions about content, cueing teachers to address those barriers. In addition, pre-assessments can be valuable in revealing students' interests, enabling teachers to make content more relevant and helping teachers grow their understanding of the range of ways in which their students might approach learning most efficiently.

Pre-assessments can take many forms, including journal entries, Frayer Models, concept maps, short answer "tests," and interest surveys, to name a few. Students should understand that pre-assessments are not graded but serve the purpose of helping the teacher plan how best to move them forward in the unit of study. Teachers in effectively differentiated classrooms use pre-assessment data to select materials to appropriately challenge their students; assign students to groups based on readiness, interest, and learning preferences; plan for small-group instruction; and so on. Pre-assessments help teachers understand the variety of needs in their classrooms as the study of content begins in order to quickly optimize the match between learner need and teacher instruction.

Stage 2: Implementing Instruction and Formative Assessment

Teacher Role

Once initial instructional plans are informed through the use of pre-assessment information and a unit of study unfolds, the second phase of data-informed instructional planning begins. The teacher in a differentiated classroom regularly

uses both formal and informal formative assessment to chart the progress of each learner—and of the class as a whole—toward achieving the designated goals. As with pre-assessment, alignment of formative or ongoing assessment—and the instruction that follows with KUDs—is essential. While formative assessment should rarely be used for grading purposes, it is important for teachers to provide students with specific feedback from ongoing assessment in order both to help them understand their own progress and to more readily and accurately contribute to their own academic growth.

Ongoing assessments can be informal (e.g., making observations of or having discussions with students as they work, taking notes during small-group instruction, asking students to indicate their comfort level with a skill through use of hand signals) or formal (e.g., Frayer Models, exit cards, entry cards, writing prompts, systematic use of checklists to monitor student development of knowledge or skill). Data from formative assessments provide a compass for the teacher for forward-planning, in terms of how various students might best access ideas and information, what types of class and homework tasks will serve particular students most effectively at a given time, how to use flexible grouping most effectively, which students need additional support, how to pace instruction, and so on.

Student Role

Best practice suggests that the role of students in formative assessment should extend beyond being the subject of observation. Not only is it important that students be clear about criteria that will indicate success on assessments but also that teachers involve them in developing those criteria so that they are more attuned to and invested in their own success. Likewise, having students evaluate their own formative work according to specified KUDs and carefully developed rubrics can further support learning efficacy. When students get feedback that supports and guides, rather than judges, they are more likely to develop realistic perceptions about their status and to develop the belief that persistent effort on their part contributes to their success as learners. In other words, formative assessment can and should contribute to what Carol Dweck (2006) calls a “growth mind-set”—the belief that people can make themselves smarter and more successful through sustained effort.

Stage 3: Evaluating Instruction and Summative Assessment

There are times when teachers seek evidence of understanding in a summative way. Summative assessments are graded and appropriately occur at transitional points, such as the end of a unit, the end of a marking period, or the end of a semester. Once again, summative assessment should be tightly aligned to the specified KUDs that have guided curriculum design, pre-assessment, instructional decisions, and formative assessment. Summative assessment data help students benchmark their

4 Classroom Management and Assessment

growth and allow teachers to determine mastery of content. While summative assessment has a “final” aspect, it, too, is somewhat formative in nature. Teachers can look for patterns in achievement that suggest the need for modification the next time they teach the content. Students can look ahead from summative assessment to the next opportunities to apply skills or understandings they have—or have not—mastered.

Differentiation

Differentiation can play a role in summative assessments, whether they are closed or performance based. The purpose of an assessment is to reveal what a student knows, understands, and can do related to a set of clearly defined objectives (KUDs). If an English language learner (ELL) understands the process of photosynthesis but is unable to demonstrate that mastery in a test because it requires an essay response, the test has failed to reveal what the student knows. It would have been helpful to offer the option of writing an essay, completing a structured chart, or presenting a series of annotated storyboards.

Summative assessments can be differentiated in terms of complexity of the language of directions, providing varied options for expressing learning, degree of structure versus independence required for the task, the nature of resource materials, and so on. What cannot be differentiated is the set of criteria that determine success. In other words, with the exception of students whose educational plans indicate otherwise, the KUDs established at the outset of a unit remain constant for all students.

Conclusion

The teacher in a differentiated classroom is an architect of instruction designed to maximize the success of all learners. Assessment allows the teacher to be a successful change agent, working on behalf of students to understand their development as learners and to use best practices to scaffold their growth from varied points of readiness, interest, and approach to learning.

What We Know

- Pre-assessment and formative assessment are critical tools in designing instruction that addresses varied learner needs.
- Student achievement benefits when teachers use pre-assessment and formative assessment data to plan instruction to address learner needs.
- Student investment in learning and achievement benefit when students know the learning goals and use feedback from formative assessment to achieve those goals.

About the Authors

Carol Ann Tomlinson is the William Clay Parrish Jr. Professor and chair of Educational Leadership, Foundations, and Policy at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education. She was also a public school educator for 20 years. Her work focuses on differentiated instruction.

Tonya Moon is a professor at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education. Her interests and work focus on student assessment and the development of talent in school-age children.

References and Further Reading

- Black, P., & William, D. (1998). Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 80, 139–148.
- Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Ballantine.
- Earl, L. (2003). *Assessment as learning: Using classroom assessment to maximize student learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Stiggins, R. J., Arter, J. A., Chappuis, J., & Chappuis, S. (2004). *Classroom assessment for student learning: Doing it right—using it well*. Portland, OR: Assessment Training Institute.
- Tomlinson C. A., & Moon T. R. (2013). *Assessment and student success in a differentiated classroom*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.