

In between the periodic assessments OF learning, we rely on a steady flow of assessments FOR learning. This is what Ms. W. did for Emily and her classmates.

In this sense, teachers who help students understand the learning targets, engage in self-assessment, watch themselves grow, talk about that growth, or anticipate next steps in learning are applying the principles of assessment FOR learning.

Following this line of reasoning, we at the ETS Assessment Training Institute have developed a checklist of keys to assessment FOR learning (Figure 2.2). They help students understand where they are headed in their learning—what success will look like when they get there, where they are now in relation to that expectation, and how to close the gap between the two (Sadler, 1989).

We put them in touch with our vision for their success by starting instruction with a student-friendly version of the target and by accompanying that with samples of student work that illustrate the performance continuum they will travel along to get there. We help them locate themselves on that continuum by providing descriptive feedback on strengths and areas in need of improvement. And then we teach them how to self-assess so they can generate their own descriptive feedback. This permits them to begin to set goals for their own learning. From here, we help them learn to improve their work one key facet at a time, tracking and describing the changes in the quality of their work as they go.

Help students know where the learning is going to take them:

1. Start instruction with a version of your achievement expectations that is written in student-friendly language.
2. Accompany your student-friendly version of the target(s) with samples of student work that reveal the entire continuum of degrees of mastery that students might experience on their journey to success.

Help students know where they are now in relation to your expectations:

3. Give students continuous access to descriptive feedback—commentary on the quality of their work that informs them about how to do better the next time.
4. Teach them how to assess the quality of their own work and generate their own descriptive feedback to permit them to plan what comes next in their learning.

Help students understand how to close the gap between where they are now and where you want them to end up:

5. Teach them to improve the quality of their work one key attribute at a time, always realizing that they will have to put the pieces together.
6. Provide the opportunity for students to sense and understand the improvements that are evident in their work; help them learn to reflect on those changes and why they are happening.

Figure 2.2

Six keys to assessment FOR learning

When teachers carry out these steps as a matter of routine, they are using assessment FOR learning—assessment in support of student success. In the chapters that follow, I will show you the specifics of how to make these keys come alive in your classroom. But for now, remember that we have been addressing the crucial matter of assessment *purpose* in this section. A quality assessment arises from and serves its intended purpose. We must fit the assessment into its context, and often that context needs to be one of supporting student learning, not merely grading it.

The Emotional Benefit of Assessment FOR Learning

Our aspiration in assessment FOR learning classrooms is to keep students feeling in control of their own learning success. We want them confident that they will succeed if they try. We want to promote hope—we don't want our students giving up in hopelessness. The label psychologists have coined for this feeling is *self-efficacy*:

Self-efficacy is defined as peoples' beliefs in their own capabilities. . . . People with high assurance in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided. Such an efficacious outlook fosters intrinsic interest and deep engrossment in activities. They set themselves challenging goals and maintain strong commitment to them. They heighten and sustain their efforts in the face of failure. They quickly recover their sense of efficacy after setbacks. They attribute failure to insufficient effort or deficient knowledge and skills which [they believe] are acquirable. (Bandura, 1994, p. 71)

We must regard this as one of the most important reasons why we assess. When our students are partners with us in assessment during learning, we can help them succeed early and often. We can help them get on winning streaks and keep them there as they gain confidence in themselves as learners. This emotional dynamic can begin to feed on itself leading our students into learning trajectories where optimism overpowers pessimism, effort replaces fatigue, and success leaves failure in its wake. We will return to this concept of self-efficacy often in subsequent chapters, as it represents the emotional foundation and reason for the power of assessment FOR learning.

Summary: Assessment for Many Purposes

Assessment is, in part, the process of gathering information about student learning to inform instructional decisions. For any assessment to work effectively, it must be developed with an intended purpose in mind: what decision(s) is it to help inform, who will be making the decision(s), and therefore what kind of information is likely to be helpful?

The answers to these questions the assessment context. One level ment use is the classroom, where student teachers must decide what comes next learning. They need continuous information about how each student is doing on her or his journal standard.