What Do Classroom Teachers Really Need to Know about Assessment?

Why Should Instructors Know About Assessment? Yesterday’s Answers

There are a number of fairly traditional answers to the question of why instructors should learn about assessment. Those answers have been around for several decades. There is also a set of more current answers to the question of why instructors should know about assessment. Let’s give tradition its due and, initially, consider four time-honored answers to the question of what instructors should know about testing. Although these reasons for knowing about classroom assessment may have been around for a while, they’re still compelling because they are rooted in the realities of what skilled instructors can do with classroom assessment.

Yesterday’s Answer 1: Diagnosing Learners’ Strengths and Weaknesses

One important reason that instructors assess learners is to determine an individual learner’s weaknesses and strengths. If you’re an carpentry instructor, you need to know how well Julia is comprehending what she reads so that, if she’s having certain difficulties, you can address those problems instructionally. Student weaknesses, once identified via assessment, can be the focus of future instruction.

On the flip side of the issue, instructors need to know what their learners’ prior accomplishments are. If Jaime is already truly proficient in solving simultaneous equations, it’s a waste of Jaime’s time to make him plow through practice piles of such equations.

By measuring learners’ current status, instructors can discern (1) where to put their instructional energies to ameliorate a student's weaknesses and strengths and (2) what already mastered skills or knowledge can be instructionally avoided. Such diagnostic assessment is particularly useful for a instructor's planning if the assessment is carried out at the beginning of an instructional sequence. This kind of early diagnosis is often referred to as preassessment because it is assessment that takes place prior to the instructor's initiation of instruction.

Yesterday’s Answer 2: Monitoring Learners’ Progress

A second, related answer to the question, Why should instructors assess? Is that such assessments help instructors determine whether their learners are making satisfactory progress. Sometimes, of course, it's easy for instructors to tell whether their learners are or are not progressing satisfactorily. But other times, the learners fool you! They look like they have learned it, but they haven’t.

Although instructors can occasionally discern informally that their learners aren't making satisfactory progress, more often than not we find instructors' believing that their learners are progressing quite well. It's only human nature for instructors to believe that they're teaching well and that their learners are learning well. So unless instructors sys-
tematically monitor learners’ progress via some type of assessment, there’s too much chance instructors will improperly conclude progress is taking place when, in fact, it is not.

A useful function of classroom assessment, therefore, is to determine whether learners are moving satisfactorily toward the instructional outcomes the instructor is seeking to promote. If progress for all learners is satisfactory, of course, then the instructor need make no instructional changes. If progress for most learners is satisfactory, but a few learners are falling behind, then some separate doses of remedial assistance would seem to be in order. If progress for most learners is inadequate, then the instructor should substantially modify whatever instructional approach is being used because, it is all too clear, that approach is not working. Progress monitoring is a time-honored and altogether sensible use of classroom assessment.

An instructor needs to monitor learners’ progress via classroom assessment because, more often than you’d think, the instructor can stop instructing on a certain topic well in advance of what was anticipated. Suppose, for instance, you’re attempting to get your learners to acquire a certain skill, and you’ve set aside two days to promote their mastery of that skill. If you monitor learners’ progress with an assessment after only one day, however, and discover that your learners have already mastered the skill, you should simply scrap your two-day lesson plan and smilingly move on to the next topic.

**Yesterday’s Answer 3: Assigning Grades**

I suspect that if I asked you, “What is the most important function of classroom assessment?” I know what answer I’d get from most. You would immediately respond: “to give grades.”

However, you experienced trainers would probably not say this because in training, we seldom give “grades”. We either pass learners or not pass them. Trainers are much more interested in whether their learners have learned the knowledge or can perform the skill than they are in giving “grades.”

But I have to confess that even after I had an extensive training background, when I started teaching in public school, I certainly thought testing was all about giving grades. And it is true that a third reason that instructors assess learners is to assemble the evidence necessary to give their learners grades. And whether we like it or not, learners’ grades are important.

The best way to assign grades properly is to collect evidence of a learner’s accomplishments so that the instructor will have access to ample information before deciding whether to dish out an A, B, C, 0, or F to a student. Some school systems employ less traditional student grading systems, for example, the use of descriptive verbal reports that are relayed to parents. Yet, whatever the reporting system that’s used, it is clear that the instructor’s assessment activities can provide the evidence necessary to make sensible student-by-student appraisals. The more frequent and varied the evidence of student accomplishments, the more judiciously the instructor can assign to learners the grades they deserve.

**Yesterday’s Answer 4: Determining One’s Own Instructional Effectiveness**

A fourth and final reason that instructors have traditionally been told they should test learners is that learners’ test performances can help instructors infer how effective their instruction has been. Suppose a Technology Education instructor sets out to have
learners attain a set of worthwhile skills and knowledge regarding Electronics during a three-week instructional unit. Prior to instruction, a brief test indicated that learners knew almost nothing about Electronics, but after the unit was concluded, a more lengthy test revealed that learners had mastered most of the skills and knowledge addressed during the unit.

Because the comparison of learners' pretest and posttest test results indicated that the instructor's learners had acquired ample knowledge and skills regarding Electronics, the instructor has a solid chunk of evidence that the instructional approach being used appears to be working. If the instructor's instruction seems to be promoting the desired outcomes, then it probably shouldn't be altered all that much.

On the other hand, let's say an instructor's Electronics pretest-to-posttest results for learners suggest that learners' progress has shown little progress. After comparing results on the end-of-instruction posttest to learners' performance on the preinstruction test, it appears that learners barely knew more than they knew before the instruction commenced. Such trivial learning growth should suggest to the instructor that modifications in the instructional activities seem warranted when teaching Electronics again next term or next year.

I'm not suggesting that learners' pretest-to-posttest results are the only way for instructors to tell whether they're flying or flopping, but learners' end-of-instruction performances on assessment devices constitute a particularly useful indication of whether instructors should retain, alter, or totally jettison their current instructional procedures.

Yesterday's Answers: Here they are again.

The traditional reasons why instructors assess learners are:

- To diagnose learners' strengths and weaknesses
- To monitor learners' progress
- To assign grades to learners
- To determine instructional effectiveness

You will notice that each of these four uses of educational assessment is directly related to helping the instructor make a decision. When an instructor assesses learners' strengths and weaknesses, the instructor uses test results to decide what instructional objectives to pursue. When an instructor assesses learners' progress, the instructor uses test results to decide whether certain parts of the ongoing instructional program need to be altered. When an instructor assesses learners to help assign grades, the instructor uses learners' performances to decide which learners get which grades. And, finally, when an instructor uses pretest-to-posttest assessment results to indicate how effective an instructional sequence has been, the instructor is trying to decide whether the instructional sequence needs to be overhauled. Instructors should never assess learners without a clear understanding of what the decision is that will be informed by results of the assessment. The chief function of educational assessment, you see, is to improve the quality of educational decision making.

Taken in concert, the four reasons we have been discussing should incline instructors to assess up a storm in their classrooms. But these days even more reasons can be given regarding why instructors need to know about assessment.
Why Should Instructors Know About Assessment? Today’s Answers

In addition to the four traditional reasons that instructors need to know about assessment, there are three new reasons that should incline teachers to take a dip in the assessment pool. Having emerged during the past decade or so, these are compelling reasons why today's instructors dare not be ignorant regarding educational assessment. Let's consider three new roles for educational assessment and see why these new functions of educational testing should incline you to pump up your assessment knowledge.

Today’s Answer 1: Influencing Public Perceptions of Educational Effectiveness

Back in the fifties and sixties, no one really paid much attention to nationally standardized achievement test results. Instructors gave the tests and perused the test-score reports, but were rarely influenced by them. The public was essentially oblivious of the testing process and altogether disinterested in the results unless, of course, parents received a report that their child was performing below expectations. Testing took place, but it was no big deal.

During the seventies and eighties, however, a modest journalistic wrinkle changed all that. Newspaper editors began to publish statewide educational test results on a district-by-district and even school-by-school basis. Citizens could see how their school or district stacked up in comparison to other schools or districts in the state. Districts and schools were ranked from top to bottom.

From a news perspective, the publishing of test results was a genuine coup. The test scores were inexpensive to obtain and readers were really interested in the scores. Residents of low-ranked districts could complain; residents of high-ranked districts could crow. More importantly, because there are no other handy indices of educational effectiveness around, test results became the standard by which citizens reached conclusions about how well their schools were doing. There are many reports of realtors trying to sell homes to prospective buyers on the basis that a house was located "in a school district with excellent test scores."

Because it is unlikely that the increasingly popular newspaper practice of annually ranking schools and districts on the basis of statewide test scores will disappear, instructors must recognize that the caliber of their collective efforts will often be determined, at least to some extent, by the test performances reported in the media. A number of local television stations have also started reporting "high-ranking" and "top-20" school districts. It may not be earthshaking news, but it's definitely news.

Because public perceptions of educational effectiveness these days are dominantly shaped by learners' test performances, it is imperative that instructors assess their learners accurately. Moreover, instructors also need to learn enough about educational assessment so that they can communicate with parents and other citizens regarding what kinds of test results do, in fact, reflect educational effectiveness and what kinds of test results do not.

These days, learners' performances on high-visibility tests (such as statewide administrations of nationally standardized or state-developed achievement tests such as Virginia's SOL tests) constitute the single, most influential determiner of citizens' judgments about an educational system's effectiveness. It is inexcusable for today's teachers to be unfamiliar with assessment approaches that supply legitimate reflections of educational effectiveness and those that foster misleading estimates of educators' effectiveness.
Also, Career and Technical Education teachers need to be aware that the Federal funds their local school division receives for their program are directly linked to how well their career and technical education students do on state-developed tests like the SOL.

**Today's Answer 2: Helping Evaluate Instructors**

Teaching skill is coming under increasing scrutiny these days. With the push for more rigorous evaluation of a classroom instructor's performance, we now see many instructor appraisal systems in both training and education settings in which learners' test performances constitute one key category of evidence being used to evaluate instructors. Typically, instructors are directed to assemble some form of pretest and posttest data that can be used to infer how much learning by learners was promoted by the instructor.

Experienced instructors will be quick to tell you that the caliber of learners' test performances is dramatically influenced by the caliber of the learners being tested. It should be apparent that an instructor who is blessed with a flock of bright learners will almost always get better pretest-to-posttest results than a instructor who must work with a less able group of learners. Nonetheless, an increasing number of instructor evaluation systems now call for instructors to assemble tangible evidence of learner accomplishments based on classroom assessment. It is clear, therefore, that today's instructors need to know enough about educational assessment so that they can corral compelling evidence regarding their own learners' growth.

**Today's Answer 3: Clarifying Instructors' Instructional Intentions**

For many years, educational tests were regarded as instructional afterthoughts. Once an instructional unit was over, the instructor got busy turning out a test. Tests were rarely created before instruction was initiated. Instead, tests were devised after instruction to fulfill some of the traditional functions of educational assessment described earlier, for example, the assignment of grades.

Today, however, many educational measuring instruments have become high-stakes tests. A high-stakes test is an assessment for which important consequences ride on the test's results. One example of an educational high-stakes tests would be a statewide basic skills test, like Virginia’s SLO that must be mastered before a student graduates. Another example is an Industry Certification Test for a particular skill such as the National Professional Certification in Customer Service. (Note that the important consequences are for the test taker.)

Insofar as important consequences are directly linked to assessment results, the content of such high-stakes tests tends to be emphasized instructionally by instructors. Because instructors want "their learners to perform well on high-stakes tests (for the learners' own good and/or for the instructor's benefit), high-stakes tests tend to serve to drive the classroom curriculum.

On some educational grounds, instructors might prefer that tests did not influence instruction so directly, but the reality is that high-stakes assessment will definitely have an impact on classroom instructional practices. Because this curricular influence is certain to be present, it will be in instructors' and learners' best interests if the nature of the upcoming assessment is sufficiently well understood so that the instructor can organize the most effective, on-target instruction possible. (Later in the book, we will consider the deficits of teaching exclusively toward assessment targets.) In a sense, however, the more that instructors understand what the innards of a test are, the more effectively they can use that understanding to clarify what's to be sought instructionally.
Even the low-stakes classroom tests routinely employed by instructors can be used to help instructors clarify their instructional targets. Tests should obviously not, then, be instructional afterthoughts. Rather, classroom assessment instruments should always be prepared prior to any instructional planning in order for the instructor to better understand what is being sought of learners and, therefore, what to incorporate in instructional activities for learners. Assessment instruments prepared prior to instruction concretely exemplify an instructor's instructional intentions and, as a consequence, clarify those intentions. Clarified instructional intentions characteristically lead to more effective instructional decisions by the instructor. The better you understand where you're going, the more efficiently you can get there.

**Today's Answers: Here they are again.**

To reiterate, there are three reasons that today's instructors, unlike their counterparts of a few decades ago, need to know about assessment. These reasons are supplemental to, not in place of, the previously considered traditional reasons that instructors assess learners. Here are the three new reasons for instructors' familiarization with educational assessment:

- Test results determine public perceptions of educational effectiveness.
- Learners' assessment performances are increasingly seen as part of the instructor evaluation process.
- As clarifiers of instructional intentions, assessment devices can improve instructional quality.

These reasons are also linked to decisions. For instance, when citizens use test results to reach judgments about a school district's effectiveness, those judgments can play a major role in determining what level of taxpayer support will be provided. There are also decisions on the line when learners' test scores are used as evidence to evaluate instructors. Such decisions as whether the instructor should be granted continued contract status or receive a pay raise or merit-pay award are illustrative of the kinds of decisions that can ride, at least in part, on the results of educational assessments. Finally, from the instructor's perspective, when tests serve as clarifiers of the instructor's instructional intentions, the instructor can make better decisions about how to put together an instructional program that is likely to help learners attain the instructional intentions represented by the assessment. With these three current roles of educational assessment, as was true with the four more traditional roles of educational assessment, test results should contribute to educational decisions.

There are oodles of fascinating things about assessment that you might learn. You'd even find a few of them interesting. But to help your learners learn, you really don't need to know a host of assessment esoterica. This course focuses on the actual creation of acceptable classroom assessments.

**Creating Classroom Assessment Devices**

Let's start with the kinds of classroom assessment devices that you will personally need to create. The chief thing you will learn is how to construct a wide variety of assessment instruments that you can use as part of your day-today classroom instruction. You really do need to know how to determine what your learners have learned, for example, whether they comprehend what they have read. You really do need to know how to get a fix on your learners' educationally relevant attitudes, such as how positively disposed your learners are toward the subject(s) you're teaching. Thus, you are going to be
learning about how to create classroom assessment approaches to measure learners' achievement (that is, the knowledge and/or skills learners acquire) as well as learners' affect (that is, the educationally pertinent attitudes and values influenced by school or the training course).

As suggested earlier, the kinds of classroom assessment procedures you'll be learning about will extend beyond traditional paper-and-pencil testing instruments. You may even learn about several assessment approaches with which you are currently unfamiliar.

In a related vein, you will also learn how to judge the quality of the assessment devices you create. And, at the same time, you will learn how to judge the quality of assessment devices created by others. Those "others" might be your own colleagues or, perhaps, the folks who devise large-scale assessment instruments.

Fundamentally, educational assessment rests on a foundation of common sense. Once you learn the technical vocabulary of assessment, you'll be able to identify departures from commonsensical assessment practices, whether those departures are seen in your own tests, in the tests created by others.