

Assessment That Drives Instruction

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Two challenging aspects of inclusive education are knowing what to teach children with learning disabilities and knowing how to teach the material. Instructional decision making is confounded by variability in instructors' personal teaching philosophies and interventions. However, a fundamental truth in effective teaching is that assessment strategies, both formal and informal, must help the teacher determine the most appropriate instruction, in addition to assessing progress. The question for teachers becomes, How do we maximize instruction for students with special needs in general education classrooms? The answer may lie in effective and appropriate assessment, including rubrics, T-charts, and checklists for students.

Why Change How We Assess?

For generations, assessment and its focus on standards and accountability have controlled the public discourse regarding the improvement of education. Discussions about balancing achievement within the curriculum, making the goals of the individualized education program (IEP) compatible with high standards, and determining what constitutes a thoughtfully directed curricular focus are common. These concerns focus attention on the performance and progress of all learners (Pugach & Warger, 2001). Assessment drives instruction, but assessments often lack the primary goal of guiding instructional decisions (Olson, 2003).

In meeting IEP goals, the assessment used—which is often a pencil-and-paper test—should match the instruction given. In many instances, “the test” is not an assessment that guides instructional decisions; it is, instead, just another assignment that will become a

grade in the grade book. Matching IEP goals to performance tasks and designing assessments that offer guidance for teachers, parents, and learners will result in better individualized learning. A comprehensive assessment tool furnishes an academic or behavioral growth measure that aligns with IEP goals, content-area objectives, and national standards; and it enables teachers to identify trends toward meeting these expectations and monitor them (Olson, 2003).

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According to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 1997 regulations and amendments from the U. S. Department of Education (1999), educators must assess learners with disabilities in the general education curriculum, and they must show progress. Educators must develop instruction that is specifically designed to meet the needs of learners with disabilities. Also, the IEP requires that educators consider how a learner will participate in statewide and districtwide assessments of achievement. The IDEA amendments indicate that instruction designed to meet the individual needs of learners with disabilities must include instructional access to the general education curriculum so that learners can meet educational standards.

However, the pencil-and-paper assessments used for today's learners are often not relevant to the content being taught. Expanding the repertoire of assessment strategies will help teachers meet the needs of every learner in the classroom. The most important criterion is making sure that the assessment tool selected allows the teacher to focus appropriately on the learner (Olson, 2003). Such alternative assessments as rubrics, T-charts, and checklists focus on individualized instruction while meeting the instructional needs of the class.

Design a Rubric

A rubric, which is a set of criteria that outlines expectations for a completed product, can serve as an effective basis for assessment and consequently, for instructional decision making (Erickson, 1995). Rubrics require a Likert-type scale to quantify decisions about performance and a semantic scale to describe different levels of learning for a particular activity. A rubric also identifies performance competencies that separate student performance into a number of interrelated instructional concerns. For instance, Criteria 1 of the rubric in Figure 1 refers to meaning. The scales, or semantic descriptors, provide details about the concept of conveying meaning for the learner, the teacher, and all members of the class. Every participant understands the desired learning outcomes.

The time spent designing the scale proves its worth, because all students gain a common focus of instruction and the teacher maintains a basis for relating progress and performance within the context of metacognition. The teacher must remember to discuss the rubric standards with the learners

Figure 1. Rubric for Creative Writing

Rubric for Creative Writing

Date _____
 Teacher _____ Self _____ Peer _____

Meaning

0-----1-----2-----3

Unclear intent of writer	Vague or weak explanation of writer	Writer's intent somewhat clear, few details	Writer's intent is easy to follow and understand, numerous details
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Comments:

Editing

0-----1-----2-----3

No evidence of editing	Little evidence of editing	Editorial marks used, few corrections made	Proficient use of editorial marks, appropriate corrections made
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Comments:

Organization

0-----1-----2-----3

No organization	Difficult to follow, few transitions	Organization evident, transitions used	Well organized, ideas easy to follow, logical sequence and clear transitions
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Comments:

Creativity

0-----1-----2-----3

No imagination used	Few creative details, but unrelated to topic, some imagination	Creative details evidenced, imagination used for the reader's enjoyment	Many creative details, imagination used for the reader's enjoyment
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Comments:

Spelling and Punctuation

0-----1-----2-----3

Final draft has more than 3 spelling and punctuation errors	2-3 spelling and punctuation errors in the final draft	1 spelling or punctuation error in the final draft	No spelling or punctuation errors in the final draft
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Comments:

before giving the assignment. A clear understanding of what will be assessed and how it will be assessed is fundamental to obtaining an accurate understanding of what the learner may need.

Rubrics are useful in characterizing a learner's strengths and weaknesses with respect to instructional design.

- One useful outcome of using a rubric is a graph that allows a learner to see

his or her progress—or stagnation—in a particular aspect of learning. Educators can tailor outcomes to a specific objective, which may naturally emerge from the IEP. For exam-

ple, if basic writing is an IEP goal for the year, the short-term objective may be to use sight words in context. The rubric given in Figure 1 includes spelling and punctuation as one of six criteria for evaluating a learner’s journal. The spelling and punctuation criterion can be tailored to focus on a particular spelling or punctuation strategy, such as spelling sight words correctly in context. As progress is monitored, data can link daily instruction with the IEP. More specif-

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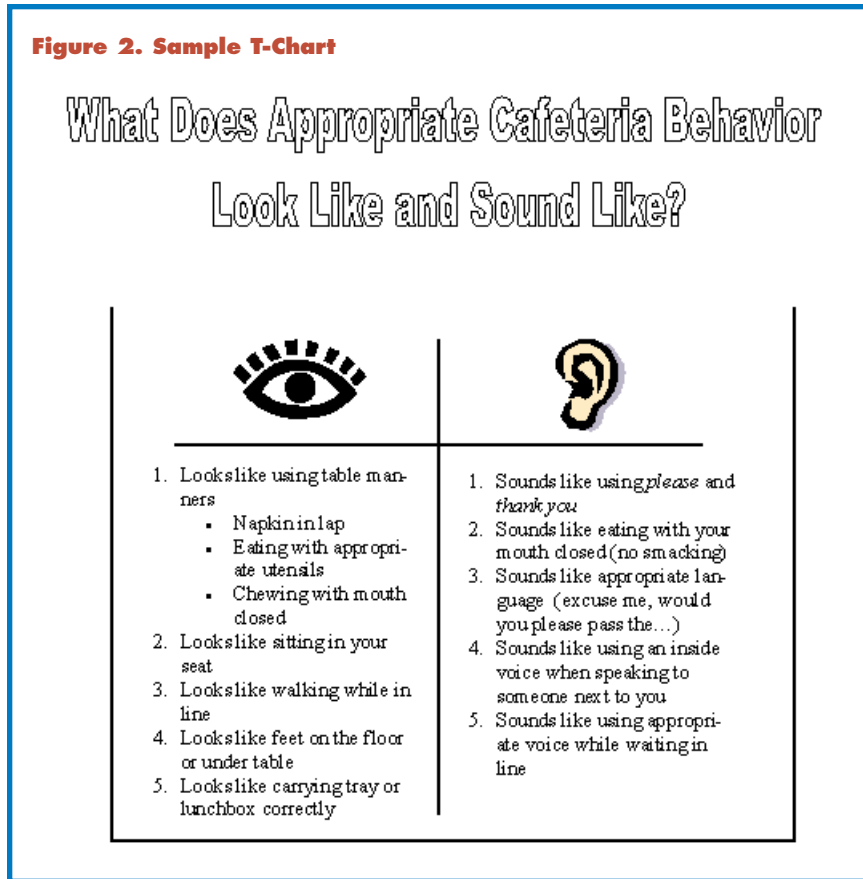
ically, the data generated can help the teacher make daily instructional decisions.

- Accurate development of the rubric links instruction and learning through assessment in a continuous feedback loop. The learning process becomes more concrete with the narration and feedback inherent in the rubric. Sources of input to the rubric for a student include the teacher, the student, and his or her peers.
- A learner’s use of a rubric paces the student through an internal review of a learning task. Using writing to reflect on the learning task may encourage self-assessment and self-directed instruction (Erickson, 1995). A student’s written metacognitive reflections are helpful for the teacher because committing the learning processes to paper can illustrate a student’s metacognitive processing. For example, if a learner comments after reading his or her own work that she or he does not understand why he or she received an editing score of 1, the teacher then knows that the learner does not understand how to edit or has not generalized editing to his or her journal. If the learner still continues to make 1s on editing after more

instruction from the teacher, the learner may need to question himself or herself about why he or she continues to make the mistakes repeatedly. Focused corrective feedback from the teacher becomes more individualized and specific.

framework of the classroom environment, can provide a structured social context and often a less threatening, yet inclusive, response to the special learner and to his or her instructional and assessment needs.

Figure 2. Sample T-Chart



- Rubrics often make feedback easier to share because the student knows what will be evaluated and how the work will be evaluated before the teacher gives the assignment. Feedback may be one of the most neglected aspects of teaching special-needs students because of the perceived time involved in this level of decision making. The rubric makes the decision process more direct and less time-consuming for a teacher and a learner. Peer feedback, within the

Every participant understands the desired learning outcomes.

Developing a T-Chart

A T-chart (see Figure 2) is an assessment tool that easily indicates behavioral goals or objectives. The T-chart is designed to ask the learner what appropriate behavior looks and sounds like.

Talking with the learner and clearly articulating what is meant by appropriate behavior results in clearer communication and a better understanding of what is expected from the learner. The teacher and the learner have defined expectations within the vocabulary of the learner.

The teacher may often find that giving examples of what is not appropriate is beneficial. Such examples indicate and model what the expected behavior does not look like and does not sound like. Learners often understand what is

Figure 3. Checklist for Appropriate Cafeteria Behavior



Name _____
 Date _____
 Evaluator: Teacher Peer Self

Checklist for Appropriate Cafeteria Behavior

Observe the learner in the appropriate setting. Repeat observations over time to see growth and development. Discuss observed behavior with the learner, decide on a plan for improvement, celebrate accomplishments and note significant changes.

Almost Always
 Sometimes
 Never

	Almost Always	Sometimes	Never
1. Looks like using table manners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Napkin in lap • Eating with appropriate utensils • Chewing with mouth closed 	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Looks like sitting in your seat	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Looks like walking while in line	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Looks like feet on the floor or under table	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Looks like carrying tray or lunchbox correctly	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Sounds like using <i>please</i> and <i>thank you</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Sounds like eating with your mouth closed (no smacking)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Sounds like appropriate language (excuse me, would you please pass the...)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Sounds like using an inside voice when speaking to someone next to you	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Sounds like using appropriate voice while waiting in line	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

expected of them more clearly when given a nonexample. Fully describing behavioral goals or objectives ensures that the learner has a clear understanding of what is expected because she or he has participated in defining the behavior or objective.

Devising a Checklist

After developing and monitoring the T-chart, educators can derive a more concrete assessment from it. A checklist (see Figure 3) that is based on a T-chart can help facilitate the growth and development of instructional and behavioral expectations, all of which lead to clearly defined assessments.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Figure 3 shows how key behaviors can be exhibited in varying degrees. The teacher should clearly define the terms “almost always,” “sometimes,” and “never” in a way that is appropriate to the age and needs of the individual. As in developing the T-chart, the teacher will find that showing models and examples of what is and what is not appropriate for the behaviors and actions contained on the checklist is helpful.

Final Thoughts

Assessment must be derived from instruction. After meeting the basic requirements of the assessment needs, the teacher should consider these final aspects of the decision-making process:

- Provide information on how a learner is performing on a unit of instruction.
- Set long-term goals and note achievements as they are reached.
- Show the learner his or her performance on individualized, district-, and statewide assessments.
- Design and build instructional decisions on the basis of assessment results.
- Inform learners, parents, and other relevant decisionmakers about the learner’s progress (Olson, 2003).

The assessment process must move to learner-centered methods, because learners need to clearly understand the task and understand how the teacher will assess the task.

The greatest advantage to using more authentic assessments is that they

are concrete and establish an understanding of expectations for learners, teachers, and parents. Rubrics can also be individually tailored to meet specific objectives or needs of learners with disabilities. Furthermore, T-charts provide clarity of expectations within a context of mutual understanding. When the learner understands what is expected, the likelihood becomes greater that she or he will master the goal. A checklist provides learners, teachers, and parents with more structure and a better understanding of the assessment being used. When the learners and their parents ask precise questions about assessment and instructional decisions, all learners can receive the most accurate individualized education available.

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