

# The Case for Effective Assessment

## Megan A. Valois

### What is Assessment?

Assessment is the “systematic collection, review and use of information about educational programs to improve student learning.”<sup>i</sup> It focuses on two main things: what students know and what they are able to do/tasks they are able to perform. Assessment is the principal method by which educators determine evidence of student learning.

The Ontario Ministry of Education’s *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting in Ontario Schools, 2010* document defines the main purpose of assessment and evaluation as a means to “improve student learning”.<sup>ii</sup>

### Nature of Assessment for Different Purposes

Assessment is generally divided into three main categories: assessment **as**, **for** and **of** learning. Each of these assessments serves its own purpose for assessing student learning and guiding students towards learning goals. Dr. Lorna Earl on the purposes of assessment:

<http://www.edugains.ca/resourcesAER/PrintandOtherResources/EarlVideo/index.html?movieID=1>

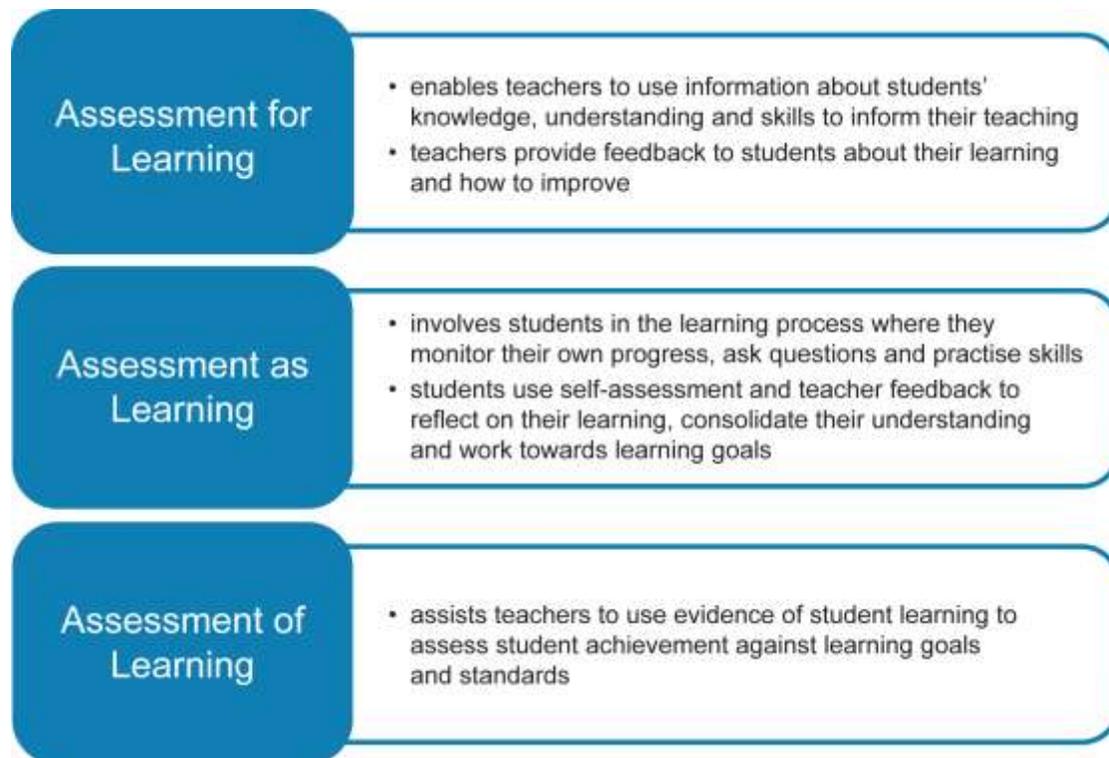


Image Source: <http://syllabus.bos.nsw.edu.au/assets/global/images/englishassessment.png>

## Assessment FOR learning

**Assessment for Learning** is more commonly known as **formative or diagnostic**. Assessment **FOR** learning is the use of a task or an activity for the purpose of determining student progress during a unit or block of instruction. Assessment for learning provides information about what students already know and can do, so that teachers can design the most appropriate next steps in instruction. Teachers adjust classroom instruction based upon the needs of the students. An excellent YouTube video about formative assessment:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=2C10oV0k3rE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2C10oV0k3rE)

There are many Differentiated Instruction Strategies that can be used for *Assessment for Learning* purposes such as (but not limited to) exit cards, traffic lights, SmartResponse ‘clickers’, VAK/Multiple Intelligences Inventories, learner profiles, homework questions, in class discussion questions, diagnostic testing, KWL charts, effective teacher feedback and Graffiti/Gallery Walks.

### Teachers’ Roles in Assessment for Learning:

Assessment for learning occurs throughout the learning process. It is interactive, with teachers in...

- aligning instruction with the targeted outcomes
- identifying particular learning needs of students or groups
- selecting and adapting materials and resources
- creating differentiated teaching strategies and learning opportunities for helping individual students move forward in their learning
- providing immediate feedback and direction to students<sup>iii</sup>

## Assessment AS Learning

**Assessment AS learning** is the use of a task or an activity to allow students the opportunity to use assessment to further their own learning. Self and peer assessments allow students to reflect on their own learning and identify areas of strength and need. These tasks offer students the chance to set their own personal goals and advocate for their own learning.

There are many *Assessment As Learning* Differentiated Instruction strategies that students and teachers can use allow students to expand on their own learning. As mentioned above, both peer and self assessment are excellent tools. Furthermore, learning goal tracking sheets, assignment reflections, portfolios, student-teacher conferences, learning logs, effective teacher feedback, and co-constructing criteria are effective strategies.

### Teacher’s Role in Assessment as Learning:

Assessment as learning extends the role of teachers to include “designing instruction and assessment that allows all students to think about, and monitor, their own learning”. The teacher’s role in promoting the development of independent learners through assessment as learning is to....

- model and teach the skills of self-assessment
- guide students in setting goals, and monitoring their progress toward them
- provide exemplars and models of good practice and quality work that reflect curriculum outcomes
- provide regular and challenging opportunities to practise, so that students can become confident, competent self-assessors
- monitor students’ metacognitive processes as well as their learning, and provide descriptive feedback
- create an environment where it is safe for students to take chances and where support is readily available<sup>iv</sup>

## Assessment of Learning

**Assessment OF learning** is the use of a task or an activity to measure, record and report on a student’s level of achievement in regards to specific learning expectations. Evaluation is based on these assessments. These are often known as **summative assessments**.<sup>v</sup>

Assessment of Learning includes traditional measurements such as tests, exams and report card marks. However, there are many other types of performance tasks that allow students to represent their understanding in alternate ways. These include options such as choice boards, RAFTs, portfolios and project-based learning. In order to be fair and valid, assessment of learning should allow students opportunities to explore different ways to demonstrate understanding, wherever possible. While tests and exams have their place in assessment, it is important that assessment of learning is varied and allows opportunities for written, oral, visual and hands-on tasks.

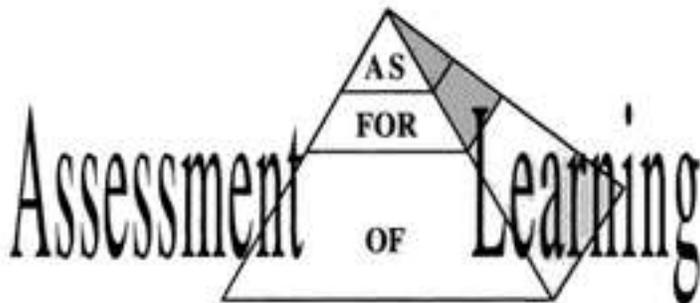
### Teacher’s Role in Assessment Of Learning:

Teachers have the responsibility of reporting student learning accurately and fairly, based on evidence obtained from a variety of contexts and applications. Effective assessment of learning requires that teachers provide...

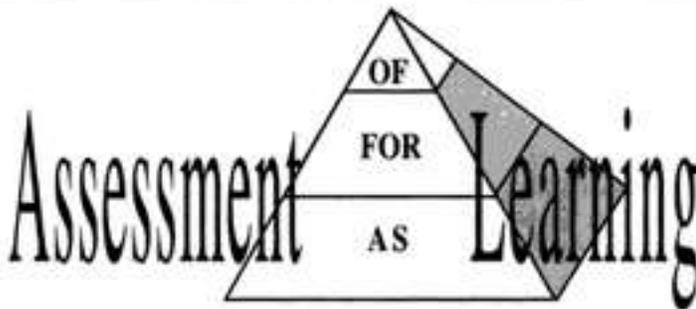
- a rationale for undertaking a particular assessment of learning at a particular point in time
- clear descriptions of the intended learning
- processes that make it possible for students to demonstrate their competence and skill
- a range of alternative mechanisms for assessing the same outcomes
- public and defensible reference points for making judgements
- transparent approaches to interpretation
- descriptions of the assessment process
- strategies for recourse in the event of disagreement about the decisions<sup>vi</sup>

*Rethinking Assessment:*

**Figure 3.1** Traditional Assessment Pyramid



**Figure 3.2** Reconfigured Assessment Pyramid



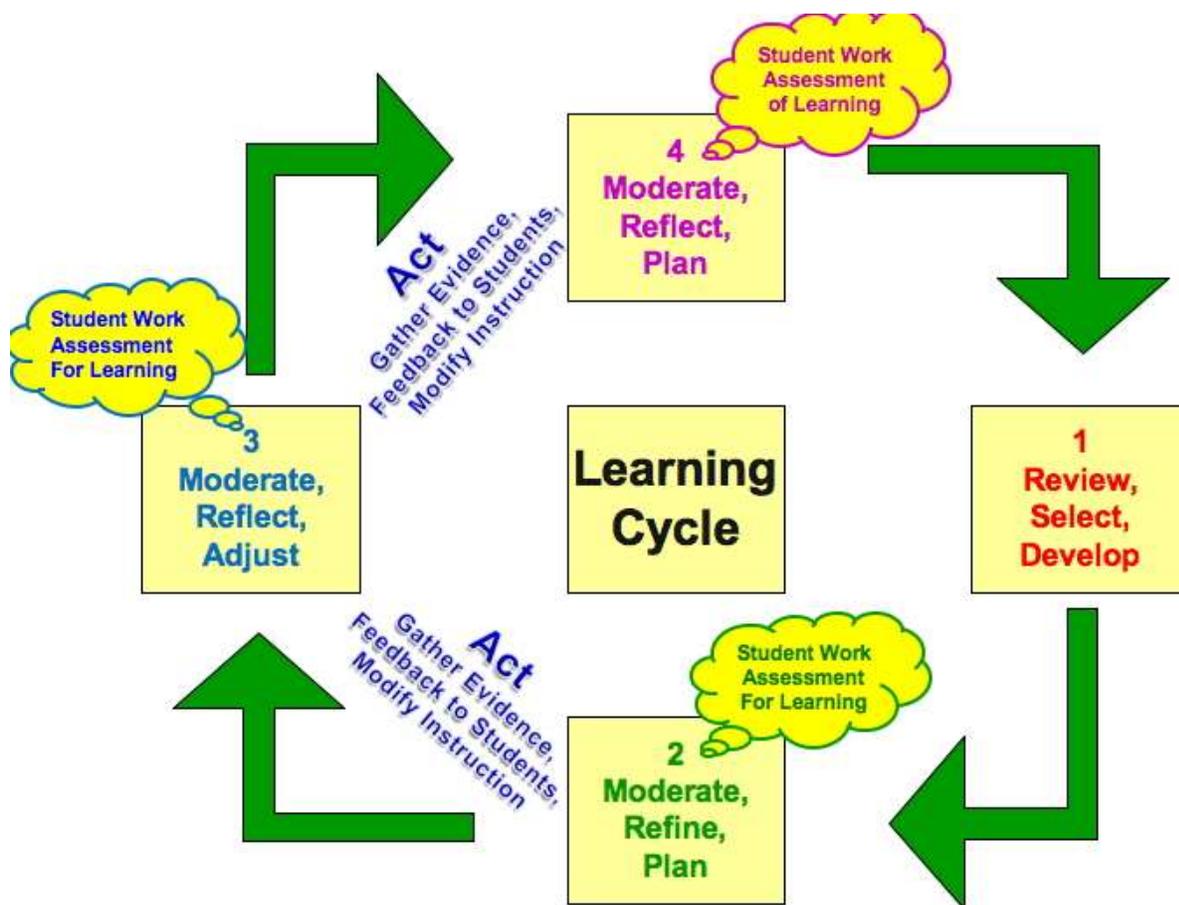
A focus on assessment *for* learning is essential, rather than the traditional focus on assessment *of* learning. Assessment should take place throughout the learning segment (throughout units of study, for example) and not just at the end, in the form of a final test or task. Moreover, formative assessments should drive instruction and inform the teacher as to what adjustments need to be made to ensure student understanding of skills and concepts. By examining student work prior (diagnostic) and during (formative) a unit of study, teachers are able **assess** student responses on an ongoing basis, providing **feedback** as they progress. This feedback not only allows students to improve on their progress prior to a summative assessment, but it also helps the teacher to determine next steps and decide on areas of **improvement** in the program where alternative learning strategies or more in-depth teaching could be used, based on results of formative assessment.

Assessment should be a continuum and must be ongoing, in order for teachers to gain a true understanding of the students' learning and in order for students to truly grasp concepts effectively and understand for themselves which parts of the lesson/unit they have successfully mastered and where they need to continue to work towards mastery and/or full comprehension.

Diagnostic     $\Rightarrow$     Formative     $\Rightarrow$     Summative  
(Finding out where they are)    (Checking in/Tracking)    (Making sure they've got it)

## Uses of Assessment Information

Most notably, assessment information should be used to drive instruction. Ontario's "Professional Learning Cycle" consists of four stages – plan, act, observe, reflect. Throughout each of these stages, teachers should be using information from assessment to guide their practice. Teachers plan and act on a lesson and then should be using observation of student learning to guide them into reflection on what worked and what didn't, in order to better serve the learning needs of the students. The following graphic demonstrates this idea beautifully:



Likewise, this [video](#) from the Edugains website features clips from the Differentiated Instruction team at my school (St. Pius), including some shots from my class. Our vice-principal discusses how we use formative assessment to ensure that students have grasped concepts, before moving on to the next step, a different concept or a more difficult one. Formative assessment and assessment for learning are key pieces of information for teachers. In traditional assessment, teachers gave an assessment at the end of the unit and this was the student's mark for that unit; if it was a failing grade, it was too late. An excellent quotation that stresses this very point states that "Too often, educational tests, grades, and report cards are treated by teachers as autopsies when they should be viewed as physicals."<sup>vii</sup> With new assessment practices in place, students

are being regularly assessed and difficulties are caught sooner, with more chances to remediate before a final assessment OF learning. These strategies are important for all learners but especially for our exceptional learners who benefit from regular feedback and assistance, as well as varied tasks. Assessment is about more than a final grade; it is about helping students to understand what they know and where they struggle, as well as how to find ways to further develop areas of weakness and maximize areas of strength.

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<sup>i</sup> [www.uncp.edu/tlc/assessment/assessment\\_primer.doc](http://www.uncp.edu/tlc/assessment/assessment_primer.doc)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/growSuccess.pdf>, page 38.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/assess/wncp/ch3.pdf>, page 29.

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/assess/wncp/ch4.pdf>, page 43.

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/growSuccess.pdf>, page 27.

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/assess/wncp/ch5.pdf>, pages 55-56.

<sup>vii</sup> Reeves 2000, page 10.

**Images courtesy of edu.gov.mb**