

What does effective assessment incorporate?

By Professor Robert Coe

Dylan William defines assessment as the bridge between teaching and learning. The key insight is this: just because you've taught it, don't assume they've learnt it. In general, complex processes like teaching and learning need feedback to ensure that they're on track. Assessment gives feedback about two kinds of things. Firstly, whether specific ideas have been understood, knowledge has been absorbed, integrated, connected, retained, and procedures can be performed fluently. This is often quite granular and specific. Second, the overall status and progress. Am I on track? What is the gap between actual and desired performance?

Feedback is a key element of assessment and feedback can act in a number of ways. The simplest may just be correction – points out things that were wrong that could easily be corrected. Slightly more complex is guidance – we give students advice or activities that are tailored to their needs. Sometimes though, even that is not enough. A common mistake is to try and give feedback when what is really needed is instruction. If a student has not understood a key idea, then just feedback may not be enough.

Most learning and thinking is not directly visible so assessment is our *only* window. We ask questions to find out what is in learner's heads. It's useful to think about this in terms of information. Each individual question provides limited information, so we need to ask lots. Good assessment gives us information that is accurate and trustworthy. Teachers need to understand in principle what makes assessments accurate and trustworthy and, specifically for any given assessment that they want to use, how good it is.

Classroom assessment is powerful if it helps to inform and improve decisions and actions. This is always a matter of professional judgement – the teacher has to decide. But information from assessments can help to make it a better-informed decision. For example, the kinds of decisions teachers might make include:

- Does this individual student need specific support or help?
- Does a group need additional help or input?
- If I teach this again, could I do it better?

It's important to understand that assessment can serve a number of different purposes. Designing good assessments and judging whether an assessment is high quality crucially depends on knowing the purpose.