

Philosophy of Assessment

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I believe that all students have the potential to be successful in the classroom. As a teacher, I hold the keys to unlock the full potential for each individual. Therefore, it is up to me to find each student's key that fits his or her unique lock in order to provide every individual an equal opportunity for success. This means getting to know my students, first and foremost, because building relationships is the foundation for success in every classroom. This means creating an environment where my students feel safe, and they trust and respect me, as I will them, for students who perceive that their teachers care about them as individuals are more likely to engage and are more likely to worry about letting the teacher down (Quate & McDermott, 2009). This means using a variety of instructional and assessment strategies to allow students to develop an understanding of the concepts and ideas that fit within their individual differences, strengths, and weaknesses. This means being flexible when it comes to student learning, and adapting to each new group of students that walk through my door.

Not all aspects of the job can be flexible, though. Each school, each grade level, each subject will most likely come with a set curriculum. This curricula is usually defined by the school, school district, or even the state and acts as a guide to how and when things should be taught. the curriculum can be a school document that identifies the content to be taught, and the suggested methods to be used. It is generally create by a committee of teachers, administrators, and curriculum specialists that take the state standards and design what they think the best ways to employ them are (Wong & Wong, 2009).

Standards identify what is essential for the students to master, and they form the backbone of the curriculum. Schools will usually create guides for the curriculum (based off the standards) that tell the teachers what the students are to master and recommend methods to teach the content

(Wong & Wong, 2009.) The Common Core State Standards Initiative was put into place to offer a core curriculum for states to adopt and expand upon if they choose to do so. The Common Core is intended to give schools the opportunity to progress toward a more uniform level of educational attainment for students across the country. There are positives and negatives for states adopting the Common Core State Standards. Ensuring students across the country are held to the same expectations is a positive aspect of the Common Core. If a student moves to another school in a different state, he/she should not have to worry about being behind or ahead in the classroom. But like educational reforms of the past, there are negative aspects about the Common Core. Unfortunately, the people in charge of this reform are not educators. The standards were crafted by a group of bureaucrats and politicians, many of whom have ties to testing companies (Karp, 2013). The failure of No Child Left Behind should have taught us that constantly testing students does not fair well for the students, the teachers, or the schools. Is this where Common Core is heading? I hope not, but only time will tell if the pendulum of education will move right past the Common Core initiative and on to the next, best thing.

Standards describe what to teach, and not how to teach it. The school-issued curriculum is more of a guide of recommended methods to teach the content, and as far as I'm concerned, the standards and the curriculum form a base from which I can design my own lessons that fit best with the needs of my students. It is up to me to decide the objectives I want my students to meet, and how I intend on getting them there. Wiggins and McTighe say teachers are designers, and like designers in other professions, educators must be mindful of their audiences (2005).

The first step in designing a plan, whether it be a lesson, unit, or curriculum is to decide what the students need to learn, and what they need to accomplish. Making objectives clear, and

conveying to the students what they are learning, it becomes “mastery learning” rather than “mystery learning” (Wong & Wong, 2009). Another thing to consider before jumping into a plan, is the appropriate method of instruction in which to deliver the material. Instructional methods can be divided into two categories: teacher-centered and student-centered. Both approaches have an appropriate place in the classroom, and to make a decision as to what method to employ at certain times is highly dependent on knowing the students on a personal and academic level. The use of a variety of instructional strategies is necessary in order to differentiate instruction to maximize a student’s potential for success in the classroom. Learning is personal, therefore a teacher must know where each student is socially, and academically. Equally worth knowing is learners’ strengths, weaknesses, and backgrounds in order to effectively and successfully deliver instruction. Knowing where students stand as far as knowledge and understanding of a subject is a concerning factor in determining whether to approach a lesson using a teacher-centered or student-centered instructional strategy.

Direct instruction is a useful teacher-centered method and was designed to “promote student learning of well-structured, factual knowledge that can be taught more or less in a step-by-step fashion and to help students master the procedural knowledge required to perform simple and complex skill” (Arends, 2015, p. 309). Direct instruction can be used in the classroom in a variety of ways, like lecturing, and is a very efficient way to introduce students to a new concept by giving them an overview of important points, but should only highlight key concepts that students need to lay the foundation for later, more complex learning. Direct instruction is very helpful when teaching factual, highly structured information, such as Science or Math, but is not always the most effective approach to helping students learn (Killen, 2006).

If students already have the foundational knowledge of the content, using a student-centered method of instruction such as cooperative learning, problem based learning, place based education, or inquiry is an option. Student-centered approaches believe that knowledge is personal, social, and cultural, and meaning is constructed through experience (Arends, 2015). In using these models of instruction, students are encouraged to work together and coordinate their efforts on a common task to reach a common goal.

Research has shown that cooperative learning promotes acceptance, social skills, and academic achievement (Arends, 2015). Working in teams allows students to take more responsibility for their learning. Students become active participants in their own learning, rather than passive recipients of information. When students work collaboratively they learn more, are more likely to transfer learning, and have more positive thoughts about their learning situation than when they work in a more individualistic or competitive environment (Quate & McDermott, 2009).

I plan on using a variety of instructional methods in my classroom. I will use direct instruction to introduce concepts and lay the foundational knowledge that my students need to grow. When using teacher-centered approaches, I will present the information with enthusiasm to keep my students engaged, as well as ask them questions and involve them in the process of learning. I will use student-centered methods to give my students the opportunity to expand their knowledge and allow them to acquire the higher order thinking skills and collaborative skills that will help them be successful both inside and outside of the classroom. Perhaps most importantly, I will be flexible. I will adapt to the needs of each class, and each student

The most important thing to realize as a teacher, is that one size does not fit all, and it never will. In order to make the best learning environment for each and every student, a teacher needs to thoroughly plan each and every lesson by deciding the appropriate content, and the appropriate instructional approach. A good lesson begins with deciding what the outcome is going to be for the students. What are they going to learn, what is the point, and how is their level of understanding going to be measured?

Without answers to these questions, a lesson plan is essentially useless. A quality plan ensures the students are learning and provides explicit “big ideas” that guide the teaching (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). According to Wiggins and McTighe “a big idea is a concept, theme, or issue that gives meaning and connection to discrete facts and skills” (2005). A teacher should strive for an education for understanding, in which the big ideas are highlighted, and the students are helped with understanding their value for making sense of the content (Wiggins & McTighe, (2005). Understanding means students are able to make connections and bind together their knowledge into something that makes sense of things. To understand is to be able to do, or perform, or to apply knowledge and skill effectively (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). This is not to say that all teaching must be planned to reach this deep level of understanding, sometimes being familiar with the content is an appropriate and sufficient goal. It’s up to the teacher to decide where the students are to end up after a lesson, and how to assess what they gained.

According to Rick Wormelli, “in a differentiated classroom, assessment guides practice” (2006). The process of assessing students can shape instruction decisions, rather than document deficiencies. There are three types of assessments, and each have a different purpose in the classroom. Pre-assessments are used to indicate where students are at and how ready they

are for the content. Pre-assessments are very useful to guide instructional decisions. Formative assessments are done frequently, and act as checkpoints. At the end of the learning, students will be assessed summatively. They will reflect most of the essential and enduring knowledge the students gained (Wormelli, 2006). In order for students to grow throughout a unit, they need constant feedback in the form of formative assessments. It's with these assessments that the students are allowed to grow, and where students learn the most. It is easy to make the mistake of putting a lot of energy into designing a summative assessment in the form of a final project or exam, but the feedback students gain from these cannot be used to grow (Wormelli, 2006).

In order to design an effective lesson, I believe the assessment should be at the forefront. Wiggins' and McTighe's Backward Design lesson planning model has three stages. The first stage begins with the end goal in mind. The standards that will be met must be identified, followed by the learning objectives. Objectives must be measurable and content driven. The next stage is the design of the assessment of the learning objective. The assessment, in most cases, should be task oriented. This means no tests or quizzes. The assessment can be project oriented, problem based, done in the form of a simulation, or done with a rubric or answer key. Rubrics are a good way to differentiate the assessments based on students needs, and also allows components of choice by allowing students to choose alternate forms of knowledge representation. The third stage of the backwards design model is to perform, or do the activity (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

I believe backward design is a quality approach to planning. Just like we would plan a destination before we take a trip, we must plan a destination for our students before we journey down the road of instruction. The specifics of instruction that we choose when we plan, such as

instructional methods, sequence of lessons, and materials we will use can only be successfully completed after we identify what the desired end results are and how we plan on assessing them. Teaching is merely the means to the end (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005). The collective results throughout a unit of study will lead us to determine the success of the students. Only a culmination of traditional quizzes and tests, tasks and projects, observations, and students' self-assessments gathered over time will give us the evidence of our desired results (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005).

I believe that in order to be an effective, quality teacher, instruction and assessment will need to be differentiated in order for my students to succeed. Instruction can be differentiated in a variety of ways, from using different instructional strategies to meet a variety of different learners with the material, to modifying or tiering a plan.

Modifying a plan is completely changing it to meet the needs of a student or students. A lesson can be modified by changing the goals, or objectives. Students on individualized education plans (IEPs) may need modifications in order to meet lesson goals. Tiering, on the other hand, allows students to take a different path to reach the same goal. Wormelli states "tiering emphasizes the adjustments we make in assessments according to students' readiness levels, not interests or learner profiles" (2006). Asking advanced students to extend content into other areas, use more advanced resources, or manipulate information is a form of tiering. On the opposite end, students at lower levels might be asked to be able to repeat information rather than manipulate it, stay within reasonable resources, and keep the content within the specific area.

Planning or designing is a never-ending cycle for teachers. According to Wiggins and McTighe, all purposeful and effective teachers follow a cycle of plan-revise-teach-assess-reflect-

adjust many times (2005). What works for one class, may not work for another. What is successful one school year, may bomb the next. A plan may look good in writing, and do absolutely nothing to engage the students in the material, or lead them to understand it. This is why it's so important to get to know the students, to build relationships on mutual trust, and to create a safe and comfortable environment. In order to meet the needs of each individual, and design quality plans that help my students learn and allow them the opportunity for success I need to know each individual. For it is I who holds the keys to a successful learning experience for my students.

Resources

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