

Educational Support Cell (ESC)/TLDE Tips & Strategies

Assessment Series, Part II: Assessing Student Performance How “Informal” Assessment becomes “Formative” Assessment

In Part I of the series, we looked at the theory and purpose behind assessment. And, we looked at assessment in terms of these two questions:

- “When the lesson is over, do you know what they learned?”
- “When the lesson is over, do they know what they didn’t learn?”

This month we’ll go deeper with a look at how we can best use assessment to answer these two questions by discussing informal, formative assessment strategies. While they sound similar, Informal and Formative assessments are two distinct things. **Informal Assessment** really just means that the assessment, whether question or observation or discussion or test, will not count against the learner in terms of the final evaluation. It is an assessment strictly designed to gather information (for the instructor and the learner) about how well the student is processing the learning. Informal Assessment becomes **Formative Assessment** when the instructor (or the learner) uses the information gathered *to make changes and to improve the learning process*. In other words, the information from the Informal Assessment is used to “inform” someone as to the quality of the learning process and what to do next.

Consider these things before the lesson even begins:

- **The Learner’s Expectations** – What do they think they are going to learn? What do they think their personal responsibilities are?
- **Pre-Assessments** – formal and informal. What do the learners already know? How can you find out prior to launching into a lesson?
- **“Checks on Learning” (informal tests)** – What is your plan for developing these and using these throughout the lesson? What can you do with the information you gather from these checks?

Consider the Objectives and Standards of the lesson

Assessment is actually useless unless it is conducted with clear objectives and standards in place. If your objectives or standards are vague, then your assessments will rarely accurately measure progress.

Objectives and Standards

- Take a close look at your Learning Objective. Is the “action” of the objective clear & concise? Are the standards clear & concise?
- The specific language used really matters.
- Language matters. In the example, the action is to “Conduct an effective Military Briefing.” Will the learner actually **conduct** a briefing for a grade? The language of the action holds the instructor and the learner to achieve certain standards.

EXAMPLE

Action: Conduct an effective Military Briefing

Condition: Given a computer, presentation screen, white board, remote slide changer

Standard: Deliver a military information briefing to standard, including

1. Exhibit proper professional bearing and presence
2. Use effective presentation techniques
3. Utilize focused and concise information
4. Make effective use of visual aids

The ESC provides support for the uniform application of USAJFKSWCS educational processes across the Institution to include:

-Support to Curriculum & Instruction [Courses and Instructors];

-Support to Leadership & Professional Development Initiatives;

-Support to the development and implementation of program evaluation and assessment systems; and

-Support to the design and implementation of SOF Career Pathways.

For more information, contact Mr. Geoff Jones at jonesgeo@soc.m

Educational Support Cell (ESC)/TLDE Tips & Strategies

- Language matters. In addition, what exactly is an **effective** Military Briefing? Using this language assumes that the instructor will both present information as to what “effective” really means and that the learner will be assessed (measured/scored) using some rubric or score sheet that accurately measures effectiveness.

Consider using proven and deliberate questioning techniques

Questioning is the lifeblood of assessment. Questioning should be planned, questioning should be deliberate, and questioning should have a clear purpose. In addition, particularly in larger classes, questioning should involve all learners.

Is a higher-level question (in terms of cognitive levels) better than a lower level question?
Not necessarily

- The **type of question** you are asking is very important. *Example:* A “knowledge” question is different from an “understanding” question is different from an “application” question is different from an “analysis” question. Do you know why you are asking the question and what it has to do with the learning objective?
- **Question Sequence** is very important. Ensure a proper “mix” of question types to ensure that the learners can make better use of the higher order questions (and not have to guess what you really want them to say).
- **Question Placement** is very important. Don’t wait until the end of a lesson to ask all the questions. Place your questions in places where both you and the learners can assess their progress and understanding. The feedback should help to determine whether the lesson needs to speed up, slow down, or continue on course. Don’t waste time teaching if your students are confused (or bored) by the material.
- Find ways to **involve all learners in the response** process. You may even have all students write their answers as questions are asked (a good reason for taking notes – see Section F).
- **Without feedback as a part of questioning**, you are wasting your time. It is the feedback that is the powerful instructional strategy – not the question.
- **Having students develop their own questions** from the material can be a powerful learning tool. This is a more complex strategy – but there may be certain subjects and topics where it is the perfect solution.

Consider using an “essential question” model

An activity that ties advance reading, objectives and outcomes, lesson focus, and assessment all together is the idea of using “essential questions.” These are generally open-ended, thought-provoking questions that instructors would use prior to the readings for a lesson, during the lesson, and after the lesson to focus learners on what is actually important. Instructors continually return to the essential question (or questions) to keep learning on track and to assess how much and how well the students have learned.

Examples of Essential Questions

(These are not necessarily military, but notice how well they fit in the Special Operations missions and tasks.)

- **Why is it important for people and cultures to construct narratives about their experiences?**
- **What is oppression and what are the root causes?**
- **What factors shape our values and beliefs?**
- **When is the restriction of freedom a good thing?**

- Essential questions (“Guiding” questions) are open ended, “make a person think,” “how,” “why” questions. They provide a purpose for why the content is important. They provide context.
- Ask the big, essential questions prior to homework reading (should “guide” the reading)
- Begin the lesson, even before the Learning Objective, with the big, essential questions
- As the lesson progresses, continue to focus and re-focus on the essential questions
- By the close of the lesson, the answers/discussions for the essential questions should have been addressed

Educational Support Cell (ESC)/TLDE Tips & Strategies

Consider requiring learner engagement through a variety of instructional strategies

Having learners **DO SOMETHING** with information on a regular interval is important to the learning cycle. Stopping instruction every 10-12 minutes to allow learners to engage with the material will facilitate long-term retention.

Meta-Research shows that Notetaking and Summarizing are instructional strategies that can increase understanding and retention. Additionally, strategies such as a quick Think-Pair-Share or a 1 Minute Paper assist learners in using the information immediately.

Engagement Strategies

- Forces action and activity on the part of the learner
- Allows for instructor/peer monitoring
- Can require higher-levels of thinking—depending on the assignment given

But again, it is what the instructor DOES with the learners' products (note, summaries, comments, papers) that makes the activity an assessment. Ask the learners what the most important points or themes have been up to this point in the lesson. If they do not correctly identify these, it is time to revisit the material. Ask the learners to share their summaries of a topic with one another and then brief out a few summaries to allow them to determine what changes they need to make in their own writings to capture all the ideas discussed.

Wrapping it up

In this Tips and Strategies, we have offered a selection of techniques and instructional strategies that an instructor or a training developer could work into a lesson. These are not the only techniques and strategies that exist, but are a selection of activities to spur us to integrate informal assessment into our lessons. The data collected will allow instructors to conduct formative assessment on their students' performance and make the necessary adjustments to improve understanding and learning with the benefit of knowing where your students stand and being able to adjust your instruction prior to giving a formal assessment.

Tune in next month as we look closely at formal assessments and how these can lead directly to summative assessments.

Think-Pair-Share

Pose a question and have learners think of an answer, then turn to someone nearby to discuss. The socializing of one's own thoughts is a form of "check on learning".

Can also have students WRITE-Pair-Share for added accountability.

One-Minute Paper

Provide a topic or prompt for writing and have students write for one minute.

Utilize some sharing of the product to facilitate assessment of thoughts. Some possible prompts are:

- Identify a theme we've discussed and explain how it is important to your mission
- Pick 2 ideas from our lesson and compare them
- Identify 1 "gem" from our discussion and explain its importance

Assessment Series

April: Part I: *What it is, and what it's not.*

May: Part II: *Assessing Student Performance*

June: Part III: *Assessing Student Performance (Formal/Summative)*

July: Part IV: *Assessing Instructor Performance*

August: Part V: *Assessing Program Performance*