Student-Centered Classroom Assessment
By Richard J. Stiggins

A Set of Guiding Principles

Guiding Principle 1: Assessments require clear thinking and effective communication. Those who develop and use high quality assessments must share a highly refined focus. They must be clear thinkers, capable of communicating effectively, both to those being assessed and those who must understand the assessment results.

Guiding Principle 2: Classroom assessment is the key. Teachers direct the assessments that determine what students learn and how those students feel about the learning. Nearly all of the assessment events that take place in students’ lives happen at the behest of their teachers.

Guiding Principle 3: Students are assessment users. Students are the most important users of assessment results. Students are consumers of assessment results – right from the time students arrive at school, they look at their teachers for evidence of success. If that early evidence suggests they are succeeding, what begins to grow in them is a sense of hopefulness and an expectation of more success in the future.

Guiding Principle 4: Clear and appropriate targets are essential. The quality of any assessment depends first and foremost on the clarity and appropriateness of our definition of the achievement target to be assessed.

Guiding Principle 5: High quality assessment is a must. High quality assessment is essential in all assessment contacts. Sound assessments must satisfy five specific quality standards: 1) clear targets; 2) focused purpose; 3) proper method; 4) sound sampling; and 5) accurate assessment free of bias and distortion.

Guiding Principle 6: Understand the personal implications. Assessment is an interpersonal activity. The principle has two important dimensions. The first has to do with the important reality of life in classrooms: Students are people and teachers are people, too, and sometimes we like each other and sometimes we don’t. Second, assessment is very complex in that it virtually always is accompanied by personal anecdotes and personal consequences.

Guiding Principle 7: Assessment as teaching and learning. Assessments and instruction can be one and the same, if and when we want them to be.

Specifying Achievement Targets
Clear and appropriate targets are a must. The benefits are 1) limiting teachers’ accountability; 2) limiting student accountability; and, 3) providing a more manageable teacher workload.

Types of Achievement Targets

Knowledge Targets. Teachers expect students to master some content. This is more than memorizing facts. One masters content when one gains control over it; when one understands and is able to retrieve the specific material for use as needed. Control is gained by either building into one structure of knowledge, by learning it outright, or through the effective use of appropriate reference materials. In other words, knowledge can be used equally effectively from either source.

Reasoning Targets. Rarely do we (or should we) ask students to master content merely for the sake of knowing it. It’s virtually always the case we want students to be able to use the information to reason and solve certain kinds of problems. It’s incumbent upon us to define precisely what we
mean by reasoning and problem-solving proficiency. In order to help students master effective reasoning, we must first ourselves be confident, competent masters of the judgment criteria.

**Skill Targets.** In most classrooms there are things teachers want their students to be able to do. Instances for which the measurement of attainment is the student’s ability to demonstrate certain kinds of skills or behaviors, for example, elementary group activities, middle school science lab, high school public speaking or presentations. In all of these cases, success lies in “doing it well.” The assessment challenge lies in being able to define in clear terms using words, examples, or both, what it means to do it well.

**Product Targets.** Yet another way for students to succeed academically is through creating quality products – tangible entities that exist independently of the performer but that present evidence in their quality that the student has mastered foundational knowledge, requisite reasoning and problem-solving proficiencies and specific production skills. Examples might include a term paper, a school shop project, and/or science lab reports.

**Dispositional Targets.** This final category of valued targets is quite broad and complex and includes those characteristics that go beyond the academic into the realms of the effective and personal feeling states, such as attitudes toward something, sense of academic self-confidence or interest in something that motivationally predisposes a person to do or not do something. Examples could include the student’s attitude or feelings towards the teacher, the content, the assessment methods, etc. Since these effective and social dimensions of learners are quite complex, thoughtful assessment is essential.

**Assessment Options**

**Selected Response Assessment.** This category includes all of the objectively scored paper and pencil test formats. The respondent is asked a series of questions, each of which is accompanied by a range of alternative responses. The respondent’s task is to select either the correct or the best answer. These might include multiple choice, true:false, matching, short answer, fill-in items.

**Essay Assessment.** In this case, the respondent is provided with an exercise (or set of exercises) that calls for the preparation of an extended written answer. Respondents might be asked to answer a question or to provide an explanation of the solution to a complex problem.

**Performance Assessment.** In this case, the respondent actually carries out a specified activity under the watchful eye of the evaluator who observes performance and makes judgment as to the quality of achievement demonstrated.

**Personal Communication Assessment.** One of the most common ways teachers gather information about day-to-day student achievement in the classroom is to talk to them. We don’t often think of this assessment in the same sense as multiple choice or a performance assessment, but on reflection, it can become clear that certain forms of personal communication definitely do represent assessments of student achievement.

**Matching Methods with Targets**

The challenge for the professional is then to address all seven guiding principles of quality classroom assessment; by developing a quality *Assessment Plan* which matches the appropriate assessment method with the desired achievement targets.