

COMMON SENSE ASSESSMENT *in the* CLASSROOM

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When you see the word *assessment* in the title of this book, you may immediately think, “Oh, no. Not another book on testing! That sounds boring.” Since a book *can* be judged by its cover, there are some key concepts in the title of this book that must be discussed before we delve into the teacher-friendly strategies that are based on common sense. More specifically, we will discuss the concepts of assessment and grading as well as the essential principles of differentiated instruction that are integrated into the practices described in this book. Defining these concepts will provide a common language for effectively implementing teacher-friendly, common sense assessment and grading strategies in your classroom.

First, let’s take an in-depth look at some key concepts of differentiated instruction. Next, we will take a look at the definitions of assessment, evaluation, and grading.

What Is Differentiated Instruction?

Differentiated instruction occurs when the process of teaching and learning takes into account an individual student’s readiness level, interests, and preferred modes of learning. Amy Benjamin (2003) says differentiated instruction is “a term that refers to a variety of classroom practices that allow for differences in students’ learning styles, interests, prior knowledge, socialization needs, and comfort zones.” Differentiation includes how a student shows proficiency of content standards. This is particularly important in the context of this book.

The following are the 5 Essential Elements of differentiated instruction. Elements #1, #2, and #5 are specifically targeted in this book as they illustrate the key role that assessment and grading play in a differentiated classroom environment.

Element #1: Know the curriculum.

Curriculum is defined here as district standards, state standards, and/or the Common Core State Standards. It is crucial that these standards are clear and aligned throughout the grade levels. It is this clear and aligned curriculum that lends itself to being differentiated. The teacher starts with the standard, then assesses, and finally differentiates based on the results of the assessment.

Element #2: Be an assessment expert.

Assessment is a process of three stages: pre-assessment, formative assessment (ongoing), and summative assessment (final). Assessments come in many forms, so it is crucial that the teacher understands all aspects of how to assess as well as ways to modify any of these assessment types in order to create learning pathways for each student.

Element #3: Utilize flexible grouping strategies.

The teacher decides when students will work as a class, when they will work alone, and when they will work in small groups. The teacher also decides when to group students together with similar or mixed learning profiles, when to spend time instructing small groups, and when to spend time in conversation with individual students.

Element #4: Create tasks that are respectful of each learner.

The majority of the time, student work is interesting, challenging, and infused with opportunities for critical thinking for all students. Learning modalities and time given to complete each task are important factors to consider here.

Element #5: Grade to show growth.

A student's grade should reflect that student's mastery of grade-level standards, objectives, or benchmarks. Students are measured against the standards, not other students. In turn, these grades are tracked and reported in a way that indicates students' growth and progress over time.

Know the Curriculum

Start with the standard, then assess. Make this your mantra whenever you plan your assessments. Before you can differentiate, assess, or grade, you must know the standards and grade-level expectations for the content area. The goal for every student is to strive for mastery of the content. You are accountable for creating opportunities for this to happen and for teaching in order for students to attain mastery of the grade-level standards; students are accountable for learning in order to attain mastery. Every assessment that

follows your instruction simply becomes the measuring tool by which you can determine mastery of those standards. Start with the standard, then assess.

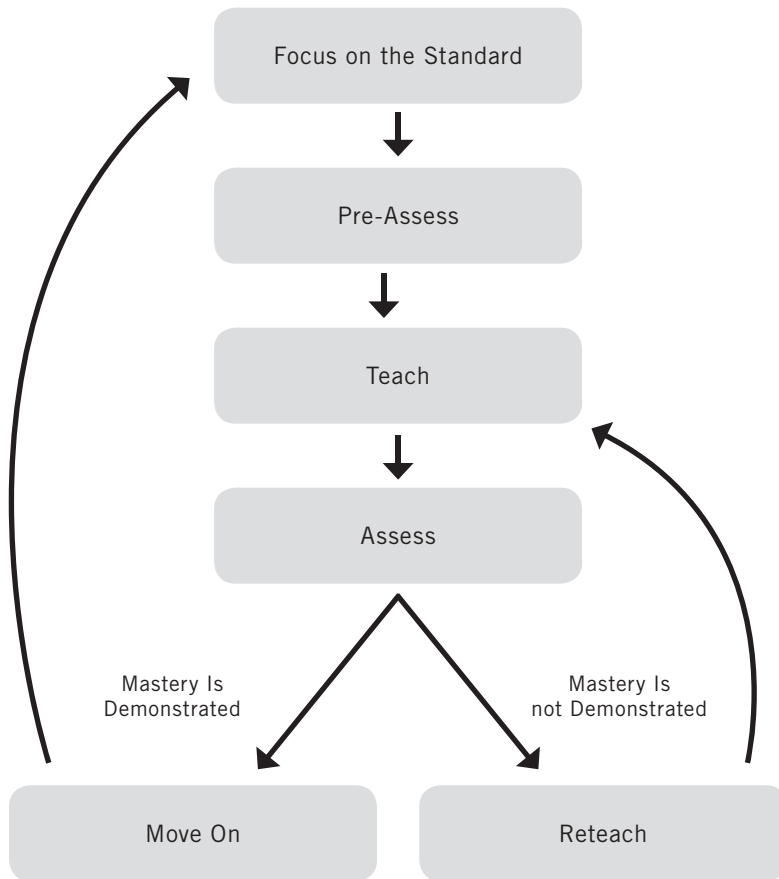
Ask yourself these very important questions: Do I have a clear understanding of *what* content standards I am accountable to teach for grade-level mastery? Am I clear, and are my students clear, about what is considered mastery? (*Note:* The term *proficient* may be used instead of *mastery*.) Either term defines the percentage of the content the student is held accountable for. This percentage (e.g., 80 percent, 90 percent, etc.) is usually pre-determined by the school or district. For consistency in this book, I will use the term *mastery*.

If you answered *No* to one or both of the questions above, then before you proceed, seek clarity first. You must know what you are supposed to teach and assess—meaning standards, not book chapters—and what is considered mastery in order for you to grade fairly and make decisions that will drive your instruction. Once you are clear on the content at your grade level, then you can proceed to strategies for assessing, measuring, and evaluating your students' progress toward mastery.

What Is Your Curriculum?

Is the curriculum your textbooks, programs, and kits? No! Is the curriculum your state standards, Common Core or otherwise? Yes! Textbooks, programs, and kits are resources and tools for teaching your grade-level standards. Your curriculum is your standards! Figure 1.1 is an Instruction and Assessment Model that shows a standards-focused, assessment-driven pathway for instruction.

Figure 1.1 Instruction and Assessment Model



The focus is on the grade-level content standards and/or concepts. Start with the standard(s) in mind. Then, pre-assess, teach, and assess. Then, move on or reteach, if needed. After reteaching, assess again. Repeat this process for every standard or group of standards for every unit. This cycle will take students on a continuous journey up the assessment and evaluation learning curve toward mastery. Let's see how this looks in the classroom.

1. Focus on the standard

Mr. Johnson is ready to plan a unit on the Civil War. He chunks unit standards into manageable groups and time frames. The first standard is *Students will understand the causes of the Civil War*.

2. Pre-Assess

Mr. Johnson administers a “ticket-out” pre-assessment (described in Chapter 3) to see what students already know. Using this data, he then plans his instruction around what students need most. He has assessed what students already know and therefore where less time is needed in instruction.

3. Teach

Mr. Johnson instructs his students on this standard.

4. Assess

Mr. Johnson assesses for understanding and makes adjustments to his original lesson plan, using the assessment data. He asks: Is more instruction needed? Do I move forward with the whole class? Do I reteach those students who need it and allow others to move on?

5. Reteach

Mr. Johnson then reteaches if the results of the assessment reflect this need. After more instruction, he assesses for understanding once again.

6. Move On

When it is evident through assessment that gaps of understanding have closed to a reasonable degree (i.e., the majority of students understand at a level of mastery and the few remaining will get continual reinforcement as the next standard is applied), Mr. Johnson moves on to begin the cycle with a new standard or set of standards. The process is then repeated for every standard in that unit.

The standards that are currently being taught should be posted in a conspicuous place in the classroom for all eyes. Cognitive Theory Principles tell us that teachers must set a purpose and prime the brain for learning in order to make content relevant (Wormeli 2007). When the content is relevant, connections are made and, consequently, information is retained and understood. Conspicuous places might include the front of the room above the board, near the door where the students enter and leave, or in