

Pre-Assessment in the Differentiated Classroom

By Catherine M. Brighton, Ph.D



Contemporary public school classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse—students speak multiple languages, come from a variety of family configurations, represent a wide array of cultural groups and ethnic backgrounds, and have varied backgrounds and levels of academic readiness. How can a teacher possibly consider all of these students' prior experiences, preferred modes of learning, and tailor instructional levels to the appropriate degree of challenge? The answer to this complex question lies in a deceptively simple solution—systematically planning curriculum and instruction and constantly using data to drive this decision-making. In short, a teacher continually assesses the students.

Preassessments, or assessments that typically occur at the beginning of a learning sequence, can take a variety of formats and can range from completely separated from the instruction or can simultaneously serve as instruction and assessment. Depending on the purpose, a teacher can use a preassessment to

- a) Elicit information about students' readiness to learn skills and concepts;
- b) Gather information about students' preferred modes of learning (including learning styles and grouping preferences); and
- c) Gather information about students' attitudes about the learning, areas of interest within the study, and initial questions about the learning.

Three specific examples of preassessments are outlined below.

1. PRE-TEST

The most common form of preassessment is a pencil and paper test or quiz such as an “end of chapter” or “end of unit” test administered at the beginning of the instructional sequence. The primary purpose of this type of instrument is to gather information about a student's readiness to learn the concepts/skills and to determine what skills and understandings a student has prior to the start of the learning experience. In this situation, the teacher does not grade the pre-test, but instead uses the information to determine grouping of students and to determine whether some students require teaching of prerequisite skills or need additional degrees of challenge. For example, a student who demonstrates 85% mastery of geometry skills on an end of unit test may be offered a series of targeted learning experiences where skill and concept gaps are addressed, but then has the opportunity to

“compact” out of the traditional learning sequence while the other students learn the grade level geometry concepts and skills.

2. ENTRANCE/EXIT CARDS

A teacher can use entrance/exit cards as a “low prep” strategy for gathering information about academic readiness or the degree of mastery after a learning experience. Prior to beginning a learning experience, a teacher may ask students to complete an “entrance card” on the question, “What is irony? Give me an example.” Students’ responses will give the teacher a beginning look into the kinds of experiences a student may have had with the literary device (*“Irony is the implied discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. It is ironic that you ask because we studied this last year with Ms. Jones”*), their misunderstandings about the concept (such as *“Irony is the title of a song by Alanis Morissette.”*) and their initial questions (*“What is the difference between verbal irony and dramatic irony?”*) These responses can help a teacher determine where to begin the learning sequence and can inform initial groupings of students.

At the end of a lesson, a teacher can use a similar format, exit cards. In the remaining moments before the conclusion of a science lesson, the teacher asks the students to answer two questions. “Sally was absent from school today. Briefly describe what she missed in our lesson about simple machines and the force needed to do work. Give her some examples so she will be ready to go tomorrow when she returns.” In a similar way as the entrance card technique, the teacher can quickly determine which students achieved the intended objective and which students may require some additional reteaching on the essential concept. The advantage of the entrance/exit card strategy is the short amount of time required to prepare the materials in advance and analyze the data once collected.

3. INTEREST SURVEYS

Wide varieties of pencil and paper interest surveys are available commercially and are also relatively easy for a teacher to construct to match his/her specific needs. Regardless, these instruments are intended to elicit information about a child’s interests—either within a unit of study, in their own world outside of school, or both. Prior to beginning a unit on the Civil War, for example, a teacher may ask students to rank order a series of topics with the unit in order of preference. Sub-topics may include weaponry of the Civil War, typical clothing and battle uniforms, music of the Civil War including battle hymns, gender roles in the Civil War, and the role of slaves in Civil War. All students will be expected to master the key concepts and understandings about this significant period of American history, but the teacher uses a topic of interest as a lever to increase students’ motivation to learn them.

A teacher can gather information about students' outside of school interests when watching them play on the playground, listening to their conversations with peers, and by engaging individual or small groups of students in conversation. The savvy educator systematically gathers this anecdotal information in a form that can be later used to inform learning experiences such as the construction of a simulation or providing an area of interest as the context for a performance assessment.

In summary, preassessments can be powerful tools for teachers to maximize the limited time with students and can be a valuable resource to assist teachers as they construct differentiated learning tasks for all learners, including the gifted and talented. In order to efficiently use these tools, a teacher must be focused and clear about the intended learning outcomes including the necessary knowledge, skills, and understandings. Without this clarity, a preassessment may elicit useless information. A second key recommendation for preassessment use is the need to be focused and clear about what information would be most useful to know from students. The type of instrument needed to determine a student's prior knowledge, for example, is very different from an instrument seeking students' interests and attitudes. Even within the intended purpose, it is important to consider the format of the instrument. If at the end of a unit, the teacher wants students to be able to construct free responses about concepts of justice, it is not an appropriate choice to use a multiple choice format as a preassessment, particularly if students may compact out of the typical teaching as a result. The third recommendation is to keep the preassessment as concise as possible. This is beneficial for many reasons—it maximizes students' energy to focus only what is important to the teacher at that moment, it maximizes instructional time, and does not require as much time for a teacher to interpret the data and make decisions. When a preassessment tries to capture too much information about a student in one setting, the result is most likely time-consuming for teachers and students and has less of a chance of being a powerful tool to aid in differentiation.

For more information or more examples of preassessments in other grade levels and content areas, visit the [Resources on DifferentiationCentral.com](http://Resources.onDifferentiationCentral.com).

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