CHAPTER

Communicating About Student Learning

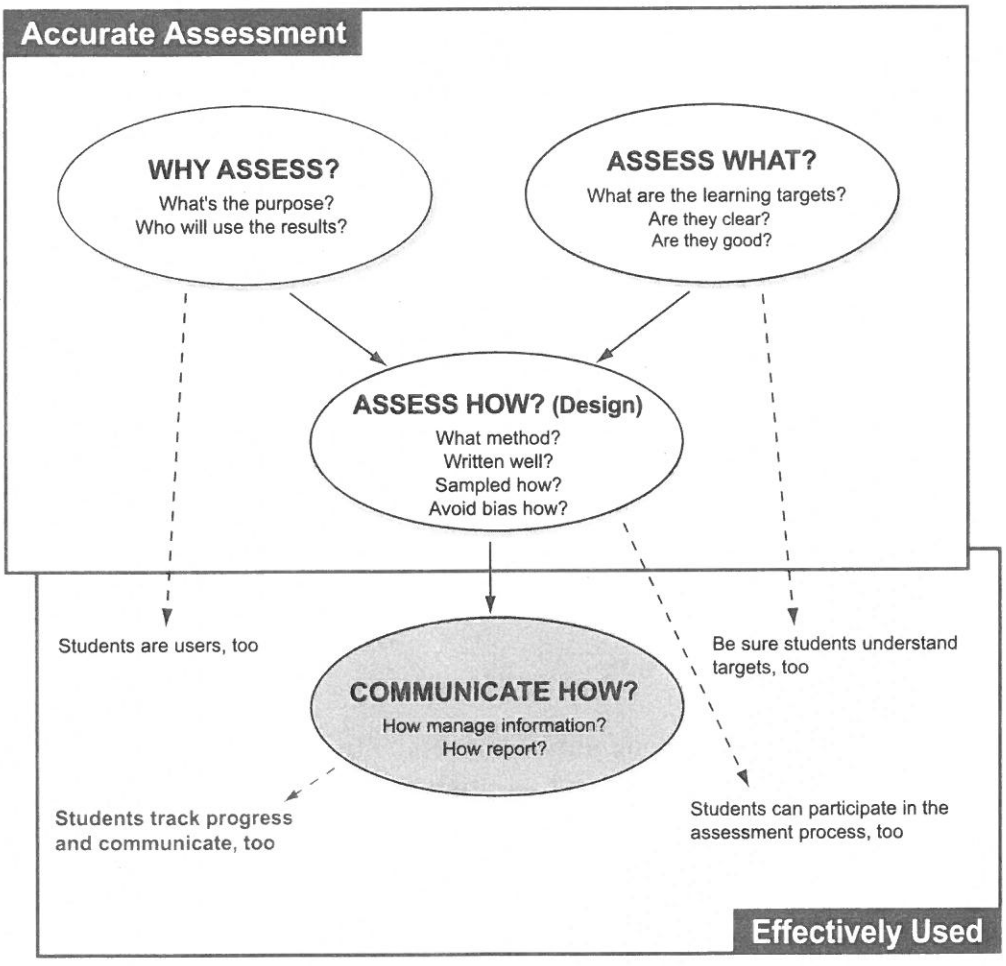
We have been asked several times by teachers, "What makes for good feedback?—a question to which, at first, we had no good answer. Over the course of two or three years, we have evolved a simple answer—good feedback causes thinking. (Paul Black, 2003c, p. 7)

In our discussion of communicating about student learning we want to keep front and center the student as primary audience for assessment information, for if the student decides on the basis of assessment information not to continue trying to learn, no learning will take place. Beyond the student, however, we know there are other audiences whose information needs the classroom teacher must also meet. In this chapter, we begin by planning for balance in assessments *for* and *of* learning in any given unit or period of instruction. We next examine managing information generated from assessments *for* and *of* learning as a prelude to effective communication. Then we conclude with an in-depth discussion of principles of effective communication about student learning.

This chapter introduces topics that are explored in depth in subsequent chapters—report card grading in Chapter 10, portfolios in Chapter 11, student-involved conferences in Chapter 12, and standardized testing in Chapter 13.

This chapter concentrates on the shaded portions of Figure 9.1:

Figure 9.1 Keys to Quality Classroom Assessment



Balancing Assessments *for* and *of* Learning

We do not have a clear differentiation between assessment *for* and *of* learning when everything that moves—homework, practice activities, projects, papers, labs, quizzes, and tests—results in a score that contributes to the final grade. All assessments that result in a grade become assessments *of* learning, with associated motivational effects, whether or not we have intended them to be. When this is the case, it is not necessarily because we believe it is the best option; it has traditionally been the only option many of us have known.

What might we do instead? There are two parts to this question. The first is, How do we synchronize assessments *for* and *of* learning in actual practice? The second relates to motivation: How do we encourage students to do practice work if the score is not figured into the final grade?

Synchronizing Assessments *for* and *of* Learning

We can plan assessments *for* and *of* learning in several ways. We can separate them entirely so formative assessments *never* contribute to a grade. Or, under certain circumstances, we can use assessments originally intended to be formative as part of our summing up. We also can use assessments originally intended to be summative as sources of formative information and motivation to further learning. Let's examine each in turn.

First, we can entirely separate assessments *for* and *of* learning. We can structure assessments wherein the purpose is to offer descriptive feedback to the learner—assessments *for* learning—leading up to a final, separate, assessment *of* learning, such as a midterm or a culminating performance. In some situations, this works well. In classes where knowledge and reasoning targets make up the bulk of instruction, assessments *for* learning may take the form of activities such as homework assignments, practice with drafting assessment questions, or self-assessment and goal setting on the basis of learning targets represented in assessment plans. Although work generated through these activities is assessed to give students information about strengths and areas of further learning, the assessment information will not be used in calculating a final grade.

Then, there may be periodic assessments *of* learning (e.g., midterms and final examinations) to document levels of individual student achievement. These may be planned so that each assessment covers different learning targets, with the final grade calculated by combining information across assessments. Or, the periodic assessments *of* learning might be planned so that later tests cover the material from earlier tests. That way, if students demonstrate additional learning of earlier concepts, summative judgments of level of achieve-

ment can be updated. In this case, the more current information replaces the out-of-date information.

But complete separation of assessments *for* and *of* learning doesn't always make sense (Black, 2003a, b, c). For example, consider an elementary teacher who has taught his students to self-assess their writing systematically using a scoring guide. Students draft papers, give each other suggestions for improvement based on the scoring guide, get descriptive feedback from the teacher based on the scoring guide, revise their writing, track their progress in writing over time, and so forth, as Emily did in the vignette that opened this book. The goal is improvement, not grading, so all of this is assessment *for* learning.

At some point, this teacher will need to make a summative judgment of writing quality—he will need an assessment *of* learning. He can ask students to write a separate paper (or three to four to get a large enough sample) for this final assessment. Or, he can use some of the papers written during the course of instruction and improved using assessment *for* learning strategies as evidence of student achievement at that point in time. In this case, some formative assessments—assessments primarily designed to promote learning—will eventually be used to inform the final grade.

This scenario might play out in the primary grades, especially for reading and writing learning targets. The Juneau (Alaska) Borough School District has developmental continua for reading and writing that track student achievement through a series of levels designed to span grades K–5. Each stage in each continuum is defined and illustrated with student work. Teachers and/or students select work at predetermined times during the school year to reflect the student's current level of achievement on the continuum. This evidence is used to report progress to parents and to summarize student standing for the district; no separate assessment is required.

Any learning target at any grade level where proficiency develops over time is a potential candidate for judicious overlapping of assessments *for* and *of* learning. These include reasoning, skill, and product targets—problem solving or communication in mathematics, creating research reports, displaying data, giving oral presentations, planning and carrying out experiments, or playing a musical instrument. Reasoning, skill, and product targets tend to be taught throughout content units; they develop over time in many content contexts.

As we have seen in Chapters 5 through 8, summative assessment *of* learning can be used formatively (Black, 2003a, b, c), as when students analyze the results of a test to see which ideas they have mastered and which need more work, or when teachers use information from final tests to plan revisions to instruction.

Motivating Practice Without Grading Everything

A common question is: "How will I motivate students to do the practice work needed to improve performance if I don't make everything count toward a grade?" This question is based on an underlying assumption that the promise of As or the threat of Fs functions well as a tool for motivating students. Again, research and probably your own experience show that this system of motivation does *not* work well for all students; most noticeably it does not work for those who are performing marginally or those who are failing. As we have seen, scores of studies, many cited throughout this book, advocate reducing evaluative feedback and increasing descriptive feedback to affect motivation and achievement. Letting go of figuring practice work into the grade requires careful thought and planning, for if no other solution to the motivation problem is in place, trouble will surely result, just as predicted. If, however, this change is supported by the use of the other principles of assessment *for* learning, the set of practices you put into place will act to develop an internal sense of motivation in students. This is precisely why these principles are associated in the research with such large achievement gains.

Consider an example from a chemistry teacher, who has created a computer program that generates practice exercises (and instruction, as needed) for students. Students are assessed on every exercise, but the information is not figured into the final grade. The assessment is purely for students' information. The system reports current success rate, how much assistance the student needed to obtain correct answers, and how performance has improved over time. Students can aim for whatever summative grade they want. To get an "A" on the assignment, a student needs to obtain a specific number of correct answers in a row without assistance from the computer. A "B" is a different mix, and so forth. Students are in complete control of their learning because the learning and the grade are directly connected; they can keep practicing with immediate feedback and assistance as long as it takes to attain the desired grade. When students are ready for a summative grade, they signify they are finished. Later, they can raise their grades without penalty through additional practice to demonstrate higher levels of achievement.

In this example, students know the learning target, constantly receive feedback about where they are in relationship to the target, and are able to practice, without penalty and with as much assistance as they need, until they feel they are ready for the final assessment *of* learning. What would you predict the motivational and learning consequences of this protocol would be as compared to a series of homework assignments, each of which generates a score for the final grade? This teacher reports that student performance on computation is much higher than in previous years, and not a single student this term has requested extra help with computational questions.

Acclimating Students to Descriptive Feedback

In some situations, a short transition period may be in order in which students get used to receiving descriptive rather than evaluative feedback. Consider one teacher who feels that homework is essential to learning the material. Saying that homework is purely formative and won't figure in the final grade could make homework in her class a lower priority than homework in other classes—students might do it last and only if they have time. So she tells students that homework will count for 10 percent of the final grade, which is just enough to encourage students to complete it. But, she also tells students that homework is practice work and the most important information is from tests. So, if the information from tests indicates that students have improved their performance since completing their homework, the scores on homework will not be used in calculating the final grade. On the other hand, if the homework provides additional reliable information about student learning, as with borderline grades, she might very well count it in the grade. In this situation, the mere completion of homework is not enough—the scores on the assignments must reflect level of achievement for them to be used as data for the grade.

DEEPEN UNDERSTANDING

Activity 9.1 Synergy Between Assessments *for* and *of* Learning in Your Classroom

How might you achieve synergy between assessments *for* and *of* learning in your classroom? Will you completely separate the two? Will you use some formative assessment episodes to contribute to the final grade? Which protocols will work best with your students and your subject area(s)? If you are working with a learning team, consider discussing these questions.

TRY THIS

Activity 9.2 Auditing for Balance

Identify a unit of instruction for which you have assessments already assembled. Use the form found on the CD in the file, "Auditing for Balance," to check your balance between assessments *for* and *of* learning. Discuss your results with your learning team.

Information Management Decisions

Once you have mapped out which assessments serve which purposes, planned, and written or selected the assessments, the information begins to accumulate. How do you keep track of it? We recommend separating information generated from assessments *for* and *of* learning because they will be used for fundamentally different decisions. Table 9.1 shows the information management decisions required in each context.

What Evidence Will I Gather? Who Will Gather It?

The decision about what evidence to gather—the learning targets—has already been made. Obviously evidence can be gathered on any type of learning target—knowledge, reasoning, skills or products—by selecting an appropriate assessment method—selected response, extended written response, performance assessment, or personal communication.

If the purpose is assessment *for* learning, students and perhaps others such as parents will be partners in collecting evidence. If the purpose is assessment *of* learning, such as assigning a report card grade or recommending students for special services, we believe that teachers should gather the evidence. The more high-stakes the decision, the more important it is that the teacher coordinate the evidence.

Table 9.1 Information Management Decisions

Decisions to Be Made	Assessment *for* Learning	Assessment *of* Learning
What evidence will I gather? Who will gather it?		
• What learning targets am I going to keep track of?	Enabling classroom targets	Standards or benchmarks
• Who gathers the samples—teacher, students, or both in partnership?	Student involved	Teacher
Where will the evidence go? How will I store it?		
• Will I retain descriptive detail for each assessment or will I record a summary score for each entry?	Store descriptions of ongoing performance target by target	Store final judgments, at some point in time, of proficiency
• Where will I store information—gradebook, portfolios?	May include actual work samples, for example, in a portfolio	Probably won't include work samples, so a gradebook will work
• Who will store the information—teacher, students, or both in partnership?	Student involved	Teacher
How, if at all, will I summarize information?		
• Will I summarize across assessment occasions to come up with a composite score?	No, maintain the details in evidence; but, some summary to see improvement over time	Don't maintain detail
• Who will summarize the information—teacher, students, or both in partnership?	Student involved	Teacher

Source: Adapted from *Student-Involved Assessment for Learning*, 4th ed. (pp. 229, 236), by R. J. Stiggins, 2005, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall. Copyright © 2005 by Pearson Education, Inc. Adapted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc.

Where Will the Evidence Go? How Will I Store It?

When the purpose is assessment *for* learning, more detail is required so that you can plan instruction, keep track of learning on each achievement target, and provide descriptive feedback. If the learning targets lend themselves to practice with selected response or short answer assessments, you can record information learning target by learning target, or even question by question, for diagnostic and feedback purposes. In the case of performance assessments, you may want to maintain a working folder or other collection of work samples, either in hard copy or electronic format, along with rubrics or developmental continua descriptive of the work included. In the case of evidence gathered through personal communication, you may have anecdotal records keyed to standards of quality represented on a rubric for specific learning targets.

When the purpose is assessment *of* learning and you intend to make a summative statement about level of achievement, you may want to dispense with much of the detail and keep just a numerical score.

Keeping the Records Separate

We advocate adopting record-keeping practices that provide a clear delineation between assessments *for* and *of* learning. Here are some possibilities:

- Separate record books, or separate sections in a book, one for detailed information organized by target or rubric rating area, and the other for summary information, also organized by learning target
- Different colors in the same record book, where only one color is used to determine the final grade
- Computer programs in which you can create separate categories for formative and summative information
- Collections of student work (with the intended learning targets identified) for the detailed formative assessment information and a record book or computer program for the summative information

Creating the Categories

For both assessments *for* and *of* learning, information needs to be stored according to what learning it assesses. Traditionally, we have recorded assessment information by event—homework, quiz, lab, test, written assignment, and so on—rather than by learning target. In many cases, this system does not record what students have mastered and what they need to work on.

To use the results of assessments to provide descriptive feedback, to plan instruction, to track student progress toward important content standards, or to provide summative standards-based report card grades, both our formative and summative recording systems must organize the information by learning target or by target clusters. For formative records, we want to capture the details about specific learning targets, whereas for summative records we can combine separate learning target information into the content standards they contribute to, or even into strands representing several content standards.

For example, a record book for third-grade mathematics could show learning targets such as "adds three-digit numbers in columns," "subtracts with borrowing," and "learns multiplication facts through 10" as separate categories in the formative portion and then combine those learning targets into one category, "Computation," or strand, "Number Sense," in the summative portion of the record book. As you can see, organizing records in this fashion requires that we know exactly which learning targets each piece of information represents. Or, both formative and summative information can be recorded on the same page. Table 9.2 shows an elementary-level example, with information organized by learning target. Table 9.3 shows an example of a gradebook page set up to record both summative and formative information, organized by strand.

The same holds true for portfolios. We need some means of keeping track of student performance by the parts of each learning target. It is not sufficient simply to deposit work into a portfolio without designating what information it provides. Descriptive detail about the achievement represented can be recorded as comments on a cover sheet or as phrases from a rubric.

Storing the Information

If the purpose is assessment *for* learning, we recommend that the record-keeping task fall to the student, with teacher supervision. The more involved with keeping track of achievement students are, the more in touch with their own progress they can be. "How'm I doing?" ought to be a question they can answer themselves at any point in the grading period. If the purpose is assessment *of* learning, the teacher does the keeping track.

To view an extension of these ideas focusing on how to record formative and summative data, please watch the accompanying DVD segment, "Record Keeping."

How, if at All, Will I Summarize Information?

Not all information needs to be summarized. Assessment *for* learning information might be discussed with students in the greatest possible detail to reveal what they can do well and the next steps in learning. Such information might not be used to track progress over time or to sum up status. But, sometimes assessment *for* learning information requires summary. When students report on their own progress or status, part of their report often requires that they summarize their achievement, accompanied by work samples or other evidence. Assessment *of* learning information generally is summarized.

When creating a summary, we answer a series of questions (Stiggins, 2005):

- Will the information be summarized as a single score or as a group of scores, such as a profile of analytical performance ratings?
- Will the information be converted to a letter grade, a percentage, or a proficiency level?
- Who will do the summarizing—teacher, student, gradebook software, parents, or someone else? If the purpose is assessment *of* learning, teachers do the summarizing. If the purpose is assessment *for* learning, students and others can assume some or all of this responsibility.

DEEPEN UNDERSTANDING

Activity 9.3 Managing Achievement Information for Emily's Classroom

Reread the story in Chapter 1 about Emily at the school board meeting. Using the questions in Table 9.1 as a guide, describe the information management system that would have to be in place in Ms. Weathersby's classroom to support both her students' and her own uses of assessment.

Conditions for Effective Communication

Imagine that your district has recently revised its report card so that it is now standards based, and the new grading key looks like this (Arter & Busick, 2001):

4 – Exceeds standard for this grade

3 – Meets standard for this grade/proficient

2 – Does not meet standard but making progress

1 – Does not meet standards/not progressing

X – Not covered this reporting period

What would need to be in place for the new grading key to communicate clearly to all who will read the report card?

Whether we communicate about student learning by means of a report card, a written summary, a developmental continuum, or a personal conference, certain conditions are required for effective communication: a shared understanding of the learning targets, accurate information, clearly defined symbols, and communication tailored to the audience (Figure 9.2).

Shared Understanding of the Targets

Everyone who is part of the conversation—parents, students, and any others—must understand which learning targets underpin the information. This understanding goes beyond just agreeing that reading or writing is the topic of discussion; we need clarity with a capital *C*. What specific aspects of reading proficiency are we assessing and communicating about?

For example, mathematics learning targets for the grading period include computation, algebraic thinking, problem solving, and communication in mathematics; all of these underpin the grade on the report card. If parents think the grade reflects only computation, the intended message will be misunderstood. Or, if the report card category for a grade in a physical education class is "PE," but the course includes knowledge and application of health information as well as physical fitness, parents may understandably assume the grade reflects only the physical fitness part of the learning.

Figure 9.2 Conditions for Effective Communication

1. ***Targets Are Clear.*** Everyone understands the learning targets in question.
   a. The particular learning targets to be discussed
   b. What those learning targets mean
2. ***Information Is Accurate.*** The information to be communicated is based on accurate assessments—appropriate method for the target, sampled well, with nothing to bias or distort the results. Information known to be inaccurate is not used.
3. ***Symbols Are Clear.*** Everyone understands the meaning of summary symbols.
4. ***Communication Is Tailored.*** The communication is tailored to the audience (parents, students, or others)—What does the audience need to know and when do they need to know it?
   a. *Timing*—When does the audience need the information?
   b. *Level of detail*—Information can be descriptive or judgmental, depending on the needs of the audience. The communication method—report card grades, mastery judgments, narratives, rubric scores, portfolios, standardized test scores, etc.—is chosen with needed level of descriptive detail in mind.
   c. *Unintended negative side effects*—How will all involved anticipate and avoid potential unintended consequences and negative side effects?

We can clarify learning targets for parents as well as for students in any of the ways discussed in previous chapters: sharing work samples; using definitions; sharing rubrics; or detailing the specific knowledge, reasoning, skills, and/or products that comprise a learning target. Many districts and schools choose to write a parent-friendly version of their curriculum. They share it by making parent-friendly curriculum guides available for teachers to distribute at open house or curriculum night, sending them home with every student, and/or posting them on the district or school website.

Accurate Information

Our communication is only as good as the assessments on which it is based. If assessment information is not accurate, communication will be meaningless, at best, with the potential to do damage in all other instances. Accuracy, as we have seen, depends on beginning with clear targets, identifying the purpose for the assessment, matching assessment methods to learning targets, gathering enough information to make a stable estimate of student learning, and avoiding practices that might bias or distort the true picture of student learning. It goes without saying, but we will say it anyway, that no one should use information known to be inaccurate in *any* form of communication about student learning.

Clearly Defined Symbols

Especially in communication situations involving symbols, such as grades, it is helpful to think of the teacher as the message sender and of the audience—students, parents, grandparents, colleges and universities, scholarship programs—as message receivers. The goal of communication is for the message sent by the teacher to be received intact by the audience. Therefore, everyone involved must have *the same understanding* of the symbols used to convey learning. Whether they are letter grades, ratings, check marks, percentages, or smiley faces, the symbols must be defined, and the definitions must be clear to the intended audience(s). Think back to the new report card grading key at the beginning of this section. The symbols shown, even with their definitions, stand a good chance of being interpreted differently by message senders and receivers. Without further definition, teachers may find it difficult to agree among themselves, as well. When this happens, we have confounded meaning, and all the work invested in creating grade reports does not result in shared understanding of student achievement.

Communication Tailored to the Audience

One size does not fit all when it comes to communication. Some audiences need detail to assist them to make needed decisions to help students learn. Others do not. Some audiences need frequent information, others do not.

Timing

The frequency of information depends on the nature of the decisions to be made with it. Students and teachers make decisions about teaching and learning that require information on a continuous basis. Parents generally need information frequently, but not necessarily continuously, to make decisions in support of their children's learning. Administrators and