



## Self-Directed Learning *Plus* Formative Assessment *Equals* Individualized Instruction

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In the past several months, I've used this space to discuss formative assessment, interim summative assessment, teacher testing skills, quick fixes, and "rich" test questions. While acknowledging that teachers already have considerable skills when it comes to evaluating their students' learning, each piece nevertheless pointed to a need for effective professional development to further hone teachers' skills in creating assessments and using their results. I identified some specific areas of need, but there's a bigger issue here—one that emerged at a school district in-service event I recently attended.

The event featured an inspiring speaker who addressed the group of more than one hundred teachers. He spoke, as many people do today, about the changing world, today's youth, twenty-first century skills, technology, and tomorrow's schools. With respect to the latter, tomorrow's schools, the speaker encountered resistance from many of the teachers. They reminded him of the obstacles to change that they face: unmotivated and disruptive students, unsupportive parents, limited resources, lack of time, and so forth.

I could identify with the teachers' sentiments because of my own teaching experience. Planning for and teaching multiple classes, evaluating homework and tests, sponsoring a student activity, coaching, as well as the obstacles mentioned above, made me feel just as swamped as these teachers. If someone had asked me to spend more time digging into test results and using richer (but more time-consuming) assessments, I would have balked. After all, what we're talking about is really individualized instruction. And time has always been a perceived—and for many, real—obstacle to individualization.

Looking back, one teacher at our school stands out in my mind for her skill at making her students responsible for their own learning. Her name was Helen. And she was a master! It was a real treat to observe her classes, watching her students work in small groups or alone, truly engaged in productive, active learning that didn't involve an adult leading whole-group activities. Helen was a facilitator of learning, rather than the source of knowledge.

The times have changed. So has education, thanks to instructional and technological innovations that Helen could only imagine. Today, more and more teachers spend a significant percentage of their time on the instructional activity of formative assessment (as Helen did). It's a model all teachers should embrace, especially given the requirements for significant gains in student achievement.

Teachers need to dig deep into test results to find out what's really going on with each student. They should avoid quick fixes and "efficient" testing approaches that only scratch the surface of student learning, using rich and varied measures instead to inform instructional decisions. In other words, they should be formative assessors. Students have a role to play as well.

Students should not only be involved in their own learning; they should be able to assess their knowledge and skills and be able to communicate their findings to their teachers. This self-evaluation, a component of assessment FOR learning, affords them the time, opportunity, and comfort of gauging where their learning stands and addressing their needs before it's time for summative assessments.

Professional development in the area of formative assessment will help teachers follow in Helen's footsteps, but not if it just teaches them more about testing. Helen knew how to guide students to use varied resources and methods to teach themselves and assess their own learning needs. If professional development can teach these, too, then teachers can shift their focus to assessment FOR learning.



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