

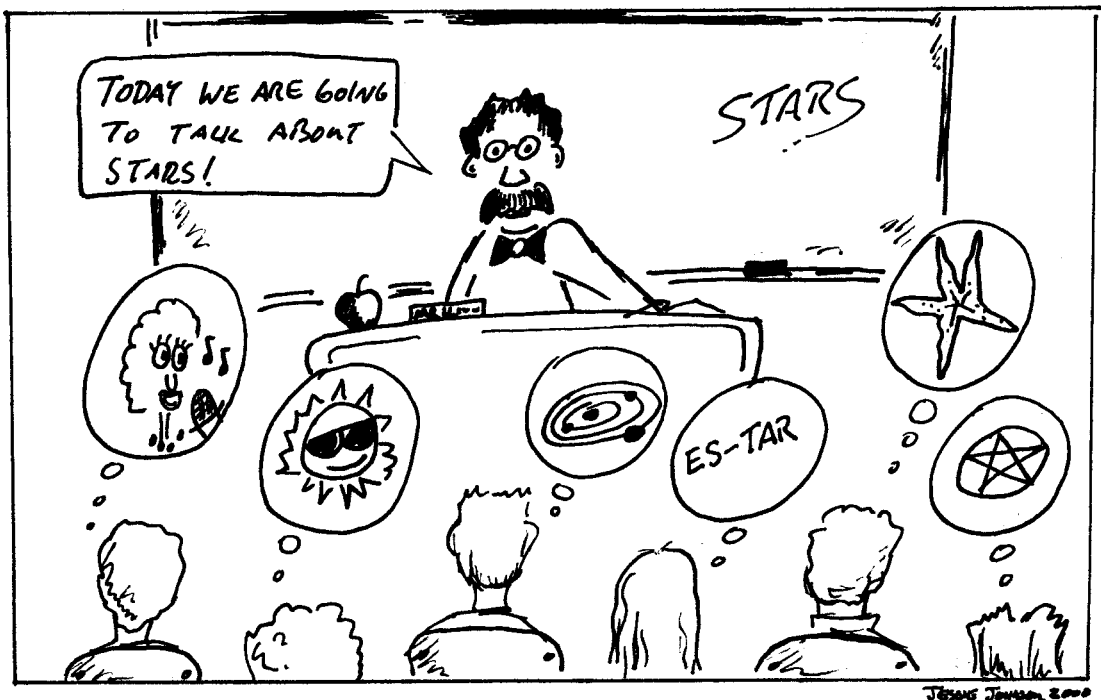
SECTION IV

Using Students' Cultural and Linguistic Strengths to Build Good Assessments

We learn ... primarily by building on our strengths. It is important for teachers to encourage students to see what has potential, what has strength, what can be developed.

Donald Murray,
A Writer Teaches Writing, 1985

The previous sections built the rationale for equitable assessments, and Sections IV and V are “how-to” oriented. Section IV describes how to consider the five keys of good assessment and students’ strengths in designing and interpreting assessments. There are examples from a variety of schools and cultures as well as practical steps for individual settings. The following cartoon shows how difficult it can often be to know what all students are thinking and learning.



Is this your classroom reality?



THINGS TO CONSIDER

- What do you see?
 - What's happening here?
 - Where do the students' varied mental pictures come from?
 - Have you been in a situation where you weren't sure that students were all seeing and hearing your lesson in the same way?
 - How can we understand what they see and understand?
 - As the teacher tries to build assessments around her students' strengths, what challenges does she face?
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Now, think about the young people we work with each day. Understanding students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds can give clues to what to observe and the kinds of questions to ask in order to clarify how they are interpreting lessons. Even within a single culture or language group, there is great variation among students. Each student brings unique knowledge, goals, ways of learning and expressing what's been learned into the classroom. To make the most of students' assets, educators need to know what these assets are!

The previous sections introduced the concept of sociocultural and linguistic impacts on assessments and the keys to quality assessment. This section focuses on strategies for building good assessments based on the keys and student strengths.

A CAUTION

As you read the “how-to” suggestions below, please keep in mind that we are not suggesting in any way that standards be lowered for students with different backgrounds. Rather, we’re holding students to the same high standards, but assessing them more accurately. We recognize that their developmental profiles may vary as a result of differences in language, culture, race, gender, and socioeconomic level.

In order to create and use high quality assessments in the classroom, educators should begin with student strengths and should follow the keys outlined in Section III:

Key 1: Clear and appropriate learning targets

Key 2: Clearly focused and appropriate purpose

Key 3: Appropriate match among targets, purposes, and method of assessment

Key 4: Sufficient sampling of student work to make sound inferences about learning

Key 5: Fairness and freedom from biases that distort the picture of learning

Key 5 is particularly important because, unfortunately, even when Keys 1-4 are done correctly, bias can still creep into assessment. Creating or “fixing” those assessments to make them work for everyone involves many decisions about the assessment tasks themselves. This section offers “how-to” suggestions and examples for making those decisions.

How to Make Assessment Work for Everyone: Connecting Assessments to Student Culture and Experience

How do culture, language, and environment influence students' different ways of knowing and the kinds of knowledge they have? There are obvious differences based on the environments in which students have been raised. Students who have lived in cold, mountainous areas will likely know about particular animals that are adapted to that kind of habitat. Students from a Pacific island cannot be expected to have the same firsthand knowledge. Their knowledge base is more likely to include ways of conserving precious water where there are few trees and intense heat, the varieties of root foods that can survive the onslaught of a typhoon, and where and when to catch particular kinds of fish. Students raised in an urban environment may have little firsthand knowledge of rural farm animals, coming to school with much more experience of mass transit and large hospitals, for example. One obvious assessment implication has to do with the choice of assessment tasks developed to elicit information about learning and how teachers interpret "incorrect" responses.

Consider the following strategies to help design and improve assessments:

- Show the assessment question, task, or assignment, as well as proposed scoring criteria, to teachers who have knowledge and experience with the culture of your students
- Also, share your assessments with teachers who have had long experience on the campus and discuss potential student responses
- If you have teachers of English language learners in your school setting, invite them to take a "critical friends" look at your draft assessments and suggest ways to more fully call upon students' culture and experiences
- Ask former students to review your assessment questions, tasks, and criteria for potential context biases and misunderstandings
- Ask parent volunteer(s) to review your assessments for things that might be unfamiliar or unclear to students
- Ask current students to explain the reasons for their answers to gauge their understanding of the assessment



VIGNETTE: THE BIRDS

This example from Toolkit98 by the Regional Educational Laboratories shows what a difference student background can make in student responses.

Test Item: Four birds were sitting on a fence. A farmer threw a stone that hit one of the birds. How many birds were left on the fence?

Item developers expected the mathematical answer 3. Farm children knew that if there was a stone thrown toward the fence, no matter how many birds were hit, ALL would fly away. Based on their experience, their (correct!) answer was 0.



THINGS TO CONSIDER

Student knowledge base and life experience is a significant strength that we, as educators, need to capitalize on. At the same time, we must realize that students do not all come with the same experiences. Do you use test questions similar to the one above? Are you confident that all your students interpret your test items in the same way?

The ways to connect assessment with students' culture and experience are as varied as the students in any classroom. One approach that has been successful in a number of different settings is contextualizing performance tasks within the realities of students' lives outside the classroom. When we contextualize performance tasks, we create assessment activities and questions that reflect the culture and background of our students. For example, in a rural setting, a reading comprehension passage about farm activities may be appropriate.

How to Make Assessment Work for Everyone: Ensuring Diversity in the Ways Students Can Respond

One way to assure that assessment accurately portrays learning is to offer students choices that enable them to call on their strengths to best show their knowledge and skills. Keeping the target clearly focused, students can be offered choices in

- the tasks to which they respond;
- the ways in which they respond (orally, in writing, with visuals, etc.);
- the language in which they respond;
- when they want to respond, based on when they feel ready;
- whether the assessment is presented to them orally or in writing; and
- whether they may seek input from their peers and then refine their work.

It's especially important to clarify for students the assessment criteria and expectations. What does "respond" mean? Do all students have to contribute to class discussions for them to "participate" in learning? Is it important for students to present their work in front of the group or class? Is it OK for a student to let others share his/her work? Does each student need to take a turn reporting? Leading a group? Participating in learning is an area that can be a minefield for students — and for teachers.

Part of the challenge is to clearly separate "participation" as a target in and of itself from participation to gauge knowledge or skills. If the latter, then valid assessment requires allowing students varied, culturally appropriate ways to participate.

Given the cultural and linguistic richness that students bring to learning, it's important to offer a variety of ways for students to demonstrate their progress and achievement. Assessments may be chosen or designed by way of learning styles, multiple modalities, or multiple intelligences, among others, as long as these variations enhance ability to obtain accurate measurements of what students know and can do.



VIGNETTE: THE CIRCULATORY SYSTEM

One useful way of thinking about ways for students to show what's been learned is to consider multiple intelligences as vehicles for approaching learning and ways to display that learning in assessment. Intelligences can be tapped to develop or select performance tasks. Remember that almost all of these ways of showing learning do not operate in isolation from one another. Several are often combined with others as students are creating products and performances.

The following example shows how a teacher who applies the research on multiple intelligences in her teaching has given her students a variety of ways to demonstrate what they've learned.

To help her English language learners master some key vocabulary (and concepts) about the circulatory system, Ms. Thomas has her students make small posters — each with one of the key terms. One group of students becomes the system itself, physically positioning themselves around the room, each holding one of the posters. The other group of students is the blood, circulating through the system and passing key components on their journey. As the “blood” moves through the system, the students in this group call out the name of each component as they pass by. To acknowledge success, the student holding the poster in question raises it in the air for all to see. Students learn the functions of the various components, and their journey focuses on describing what each component of the circulatory system contributes.



THINGS TO CONSIDER

This activity utilizes visual-spatial, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal, and naturalist intelligences to help the students learn vocabulary about the circulatory system. Is this typically the way teachers approach teaching vocabulary? What would be the positive and negative aspects of assessing in this way? Think about your classroom; do you have students who have a preference for a specific kind of assessment? Are there ways that you can use assessments that involve multiple intelligences?

Further, think about when you allow choice with your own students. Are some responses “better” than others? Why do you feel that this is so? What is the strength of each response? How could you, as a teacher, help each of the students above improve and build their own strengths?

In analyzing the various ways students can respond, we should also consider the use of time. Rigid time limits on classroom assessment lead to questions about the purpose of the assessment. *Is it to gain accurate information about learning? Or is it to see who comes up with an answer fastest?* When students who are bridging languages and culture are faced with time limits, the accuracy of the assessment can be seriously compromised. When the target is one that is time dependent — like the task that firefighters face when responding to a blazing home — then, of course, time is a major factor. But for students who may well understand or be able to produce a high quality product given additional time, flexibility is an essential option for good assessment.

How to Make Assessment Work for Everyone: Ensuring Clear Criteria

The criteria that educators utilize when assessing student performance are a significant part of assessment. As in the above examples, cultural and linguistic factors play a role. For students from different backgrounds, certain criteria may not make sense and may make it difficult for them to know how to improve their work.

Useful criteria make learning targets clear for all of us — students, teachers, and parents — assuring that the first key to good assessment is in place. Our concern is that criteria that may seem clear and obvious to some students — and to us — may be very fuzzy for students from language and cultural minorities. In this case, our second key to quality, knowing the users of assessments and assuring that our purpose is clear to all, will not be met. For all students, the keys to good assessment should be used and an emphasis on clear and appropriate learning targets and clear and appropriate purposes should result in clear and appropriate criteria.

Criteria are clearest when students are involved in developing, trying out, and refining them. One strategy for involving students in developing criteria as well as for making meaning of criteria is to help them see criteria in the world around them. There are four simple steps teachers can go through with students to help them influence and understand how their work will be assessed (adapted from Gregory, Cameron, & Davies, 1997).

1. Students should brainstorm all the possible attributes of any given assignment.
2. Students should sort the subsequent lists of attributes into like responses, then create and label categories. The class should discuss whether some of the things on the list are really personal preferences rather than required components. Each category may become a trait.
3. For each trait, the class should brainstorm what constitutes high, medium, and low performance on the trait. This forms a rubric made of criteria that can be used to score student performance, indicating strengths and areas for improvement.
4. The class should try out the criteria with work samples, and then add, revise, and refine as needed.

Even when there's an existing scoring guide or rubric, time spent helping ALL students understand criteria will pay off in improved performance.

When students are encouraged to brainstorm traits and to define high quality for themselves, the result is often healthy discussion about different interpretations of quality. These differences that are revealed in the brainstorming and discussions are both insights for the teacher and ways to help all students come to a better understanding of the particular learning target.



VIGNETTE: THE SUBSTITUTE

The following example shows how students can be involved in the creation of criteria (Culham, 1999). The teacher in the vignette uses the steps listed above.

Ms. Nelson is preparing the students in her Brooklyn math classes for work on problem solving. In the next few weeks, students will be expected to work on several different complex, multifaceted problems. She plans to assess their results using the following criteria or traits: conceptual understanding, strategies and reasoning, computation and execution, insights, and communication. She has rubrics for these traits so that students can see where to improve, but she is afraid that if she just shows the rubrics to her students, they will be intimidated and confused.

She decides that before she talks about problem solving, she needs to do more to help her students understand scoring rubrics in general. She wants to emphasize that life is filled with things that can be described and evaluated according to traits. People make these kinds of assessments all the time. Further, she wants her students to see that identifying traits is a way to break something into parts, each of which can be addressed individually, ultimately leading to improved performance overall. She decides to have students develop their own rubric for something very familiar to them: behavior while a substitute is in the room.

This is the scoring rubric that the class develops:

Rubric for a Substitute to Use with Ms. Nelson's Class

- 5 *The class's behavior was so wonderful that the substitute would be tickled and delighted to come back to our classroom to substitute again. The students (with maybe one or two exceptions):*
- *Lined up, entered quietly, and went directly to their seats*
 - *Had needed materials out and ready*
 - *Looked at the speaker, especially the teacher when s/he was teaching*
 - *Were quiet, polite, and responsible in dealing with the teacher AND one another*
 - *Used class time wisely*
- 3 *The class's behavior was average. Some times were better than others. More than a few students needed reminders.*
- *The students may have lined up and entered noisily, but quieted down after entering the classroom or being reminded once*
 - *Most had materials ready; some did not*
 - *More than a few students needed reminders to stop talking when they should have been listening*
 - *Some students wasted class time or needed reminders to get back on track*
- 1 *The class's behavior was so horrid that the substitute would be delighted to NEVER come back to our classroom.*
- *Lining up and entering the room was noisy and chaotic*
 - *Few students had materials out and ready*
 - *Many students were noisy or inattentive when the teacher was teaching*
 - *There were many incidents of students being loud, rude, and/or irresponsible*
 - *Very few students used class time wisely*

After discussing and laughing with her students about the above rubric, Ms. Nelson feels more confident about the task of introducing her rubrics for mathematical problem solving. At the same time, she knows further discussion will be necessary to ensure that all of her students understand them.



THINGS TO CONSIDER

If students do not understand how their performance is being scored, it will be difficult for them to know what to do in order to improve. Do all of your students agree on what “good” looks like? Do they understand what the scoring or grading system means? For example, students may not understand the difference between *usually*, *sometimes*, and *little*. Similarly, with many points on a scale, it becomes difficult for teachers and students to have a clear picture of the improvements needed in a piece of work in order to receive a higher score. On a 20-point scale, what’s the difference between a 13 and a 14? What does the student do differently next time? Moreover, does the rubric assess what you want it to assess? For instance, a focus on the amount of information may not be appropriate. Does a student whose essay provides *four* major causes of the Civil War demonstrate lesser achievement than a student who assembles *seven* trivial facts? In improving student learning, the way performance is scored can be as significant as the assessment itself. Some rubrics help students easily see what to do to improve while others leave them confused.

Ultimately, we hope students will learn to assess their own work. The process of discussing criteria and then using the criteria to score their own work samples can be a powerful learning experience, helping students to take more responsibility for their own learning. However, not all students from all cultural backgrounds are prepared for, or comfortable with, such levels of self-reflection. Estrin and Nelson-Barber (1995) offer the following list of questions for educators to consider as they develop criteria and assessment plans:

- Are children asked to evaluate themselves verbally outside of school?
- When is it acceptable for a person to claim to have done something well?

- When is it all right for a student to evaluate his or her own work positively?
 - One-on-one with a teacher?
 - With a parent?
 - With a peer?
 - With an older/younger sibling?
 - Is it permissible for a student to compare himself/herself to a peer in terms of achievement or performance?
 - Is it permissible for a student to compare himself/herself to an external standard?
 - How do children know they are getting better at doing something?
 - Under what circumstances do people consciously engage in reflection in your setting?
 - Under what circumstances do people set goals for the future?
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How to Make Assessment Work for Everyone: Balancing Individual and Cooperative Assessments

We want to match our methods of assessment to students' strengths and experience, as well as help students stretch beyond their own comfort zones. As noted earlier, some students are naturally more focused on the success of the group while others are more focused on their individual success. In order to help those students who have to learn to navigate between the expectations of home and school cultures, teachers will need to carefully explore strategies. But it would be beneficial for students whose culture matches that of the school to also learn new ways of participating in assessment. Here are some ideas for addressing both sets of students' needs.

Group work can be configured to provide opportunities for both cooperative and individual effort. The key is to balance both. When tasks are truly collaborative, students may:

- Help each other figure out how to approach or complete the task (or parts of the task)

- Figure out how to share limited resources (e.g., one copy of a newspaper clipping that everyone needs to read)
- Take over for another who can't complete his/her share of the task for some reason
- Express joint ownership of the completed task (e.g., through the way they present or illustrate their results)

While collaborative tasks necessarily require a give and take, they can also be designed to require individual reflection and self-assessment related to progress, challenges, contributions to the group, and so forth. To further stretch students beyond their current strengths, teachers may create activities in which students:

- Combine individual and group assessments into extended tasks including informal assessment of students' entering knowledge bases with cooperative strategies like KWL (what we know about the topic, what we want to know more about, what we learned about the topic), individually web or list things they know about the topic; write in their journal, and so forth.
- Include self-assessments and peer reviews that lead to revision and refinement.
- Document their individual contributions to the overall effort.
- Select pieces of work that are included as evidence of individual learning.



VIGNETTE: MAKING UP LOST TIME

The example below (adapted from work by Sablan, 1994), shows how a balance between cooperative and individual assignments can be achieved.

After a series of storms disrupts the school year, a teacher comes up with the following lesson. It includes opportunities for both collaborative and individual work.

Setting and Role: *This year’s storms have closed your district’s schools for several weeks. You are part of a team of students investigating possible actions to complete the school year. It’s now February 2, and the final plan is expected to be implemented on March 1.*

Goal or Challenge: *Students must complete 180 days of school to meet state requirements. The proposal currently being circulated would extend classes into July. The Director of Education would like to be able to complete the school year without adding extra days. Your challenge is to investigate the state requirements and come up with two or more alternative plans for meeting the required 180 days by June 18.*

Product/Performance and Purpose: *Create and present a plan to the Director and the School-Community Council at their next meeting. To prepare for the meeting:*

- *Individually, investigate and prepare two or more alternative plans for meeting the required 180 days by June 18. Please refer to state and board of education policies.*
- *As a group, select the one among your plans that the group believes is most effective. Prepare supporting reasons for your selection. Individually, record your thoughts on the group’s decisionmaking process in a journal.*
- *Decide how best to communicate your plan to decisionmakers.*
- *Present your plan to the council with a display of the mathematical calculations that demonstrate that your plan will satisfy the 180–day requirement within the time remaining in the school calendar.*
- *Briefly record in your individual journals and describe in your presentation the issues your group dealt with when putting together the plans and deciding which would be most effective.*

Audience: *School-Community Council and Director of Education.*

Criteria for Success:

- *The selected plan will ensure the close of the school year by June 18.*
 - *Mathematical calculations are complete and accurate.*
 - *Policies and requirements are met by the plan.*
 - *Implementing the plan will not require significant additional costs.*
 - *Conclusions and recommendations are backed up by data, graphs, and supporting details.*
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THINGS TO CONSIDER

Students need to learn to work both in groups and also as individuals. Are your students receiving sufficient opportunities to develop proficiency in both? As we work with students to balance individual and cooperative assessments, we must remember that it takes time. Students may not be able or willing to move quickly from one end of the scale to the other.

Some Final Thoughts

In the midst of reaching all of our students and promoting their success, we need to take care that the tasks we set do not limit our students' ability to show their learning because of our own limited expectations of certain students. Building on student strengths and ensuring quality assessment does not mean "dumbing down." We want our assessments to honor students' diverse strengths WHILE demanding intellectual rigor.

It's also important to give students time to prepare for an assessment. They can be told what will be happening and what the expectations are for performance. This step is particularly important for formal tests that are administered in a relatively standardized way. Students should be allowed to talk about their experiences with tests and ask questions about the upcoming test or the testing process.

In addition, the performance of English language learners and students from nondominant linguistic and cultural groups should be scored by teachers who have an understanding of linguistic and cultural issues. For example, many spelling patterns of transitional bilingual students are understandable with reference to their primary language but almost inscrutable to a reader who does not know that language. "He geib ibriting" may not be read as "He gave everything." The problem extends to understanding students' syntax and their meaning. Confusion about how to mark the past tense ("he didn't wanted") may be understandable, but more complex syntactic errors based on the student's first language may result in incomprehensible answers. Semantic confusions (versus obvious vocabulary substitutions) may lead to wrong interpretations of student ability. A character may be described as "shy" rather than

“ashamed” by a student because the same word in Spanish (*vergüenza*) can mean both shame and shyness. An untrained scorer may conclude that a student has low comprehension rather than problems with spelling, syntax, or vocabulary. It is important to distinguish between *real* indicators of learning problems and features of work that merely represent typical stages of English language learning.

Summary

In this section, we have talked about how teachers can tap into the cultural and linguistic strengths of students. If we could see into the heads of students and see the cartoon captions that were on the first page of this section, building on the culture and language of students would be a much easier process. However, in reality, as teachers we are learning about our students as they learn about us. As teachers we have the responsibility to build an environment where students can succeed.

Knowing how to build on student strengths and use good assessments are increasingly important skills for teachers. In order to truly know what students know and are able to do, we must have high quality systems of assessment in our classrooms. Those systems should include connecting assessments to student culture and experience, ensuring diversity in the ways students can respond, ensuring clear criteria, and balancing individual and cooperative assessments. The next section focuses on how to fix and revise existing assessments.