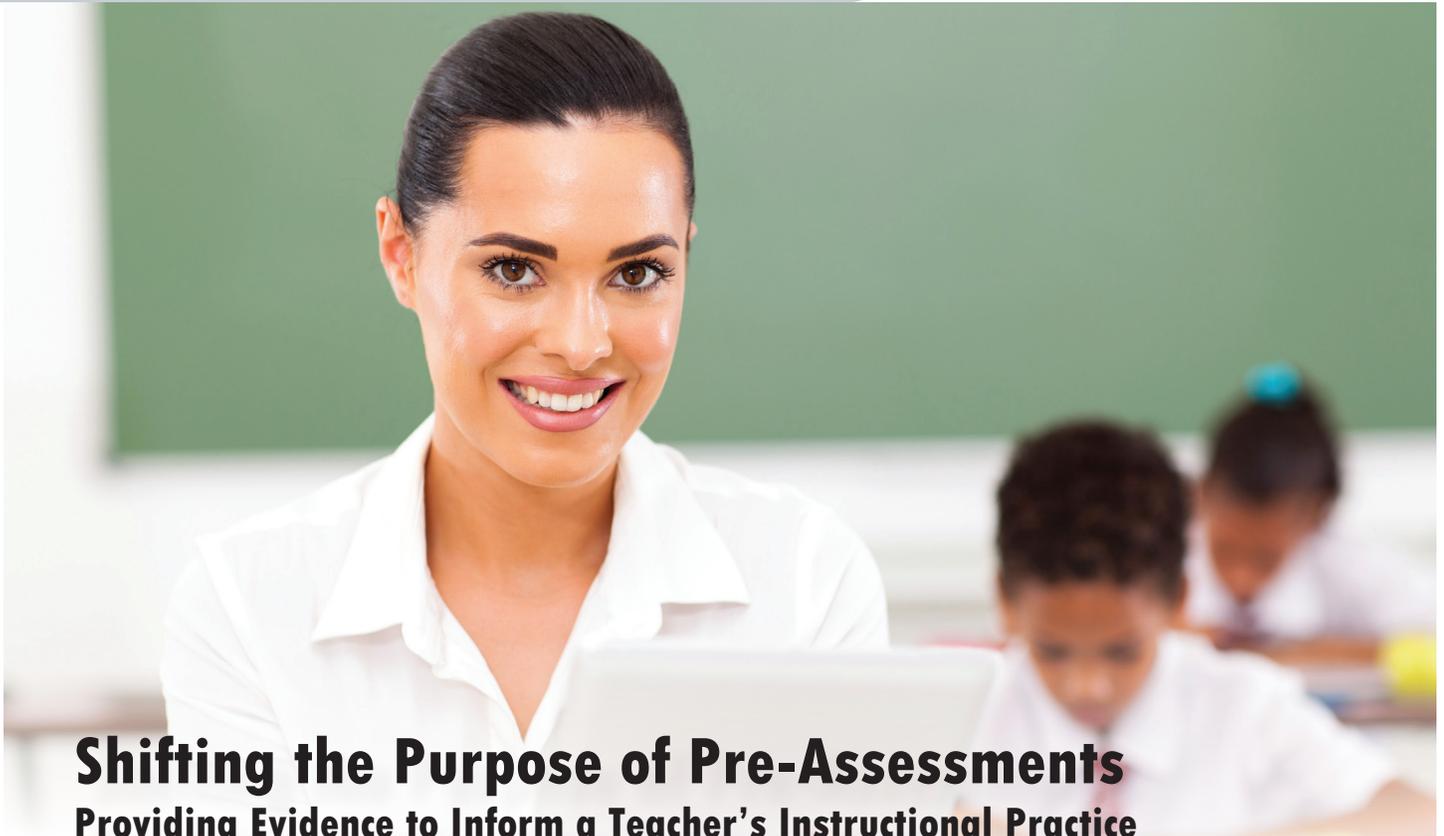


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Best Practices/Tom Many, EdD



Shifting the Purpose of Pre-Assessments Providing Evidence to Inform a Teacher's Instructional Practice

A traditional pre-assessment consists of a handful of tasks—usually problems, prompts or activities similar to those students will engage in during the unit—students respond to before instruction begins. The purpose of a pre-assessment is to determine what students know before a unit is taught.

Despite an overwhelming consensus that pre-assessments can be an effective tool to improve student learning, many teachers are reluctant to expand their use in the classroom. According to teachers, the typical outcome of a pre-assessment is that the majority of students fail the pretest, and because of this, pre-assessments generate little information that can be used when planning the upcoming unit. Unfortunately, most teachers view traditional pre-assessments as a waste of time and energy.

“It’s no surprise that pre-assessments have gotten a bad rap because they’re seen by teachers as tests

implemented before the lesson begins which raises the anxiety of learners” -Byrd, I. 2011

So, how can principals generate more support for the use of pre-assessments? One strategy principals should consider is shifting the purpose of pre-assessments from the narrow goal of identifying what students know and don’t know to the broader goal of informing a teacher’s instructional practice, assessing a student’s readiness to learn, *and* identifying which students have mastered which aspects of the new material.

Done well, pre-assessments will certainly identify what students already know about the upcoming unit of instruction, but they can also detect any gaps in a student’s prior knowledge, guide the creation of flexible groups, and provide insight into the most effective teaching strategies, methods and materials to help students learn. Pre-assess-

ments can be a terrific way for teachers to gather more information about each learner in the classroom.

Pre-assessments can also be beneficial to students. A well-designed pre-assessment can give students a preview of the content that will be covered in the upcoming unit but it can also help students understand what they need to learn, where they currently are in the learning progression, and what they need to do to close the gap between where they are and where they need to be.

If a shift similar to what was described above took place and the traditional purpose of pre-assessments was expanded, the use of pre-assessments would also expand. Using pre-assessments to identify which students were proficient barely scratches the surface of what they can do to help students learn. Ideally, pre-assessments should inform our instructional practice.

“Your pre-assessment should do more than separate the class into two groups: mastery and non-mastery. It should inform your lessons.” -Byrd, I. (2011).

A pre-assessment designed to inform a teacher’s instructional practice would check on the acquisition of pre-requisite skills; teachers need to know that their students are ready to learn. For students, perhaps the only thing more frustrating than sitting through lessons based on content they have already mastered would be sitting through lessons where they’re expected to learn new material but lack the pre-requisite knowledge, skills and dispositions to be successful.

Students’ readiness to learn is compromised when they have gaps or holes in their prior knowledge, misconceptions around important concepts or simply lack the pre-requisite skills necessary to master new material. Pre-assessments give teachers important information about their students’ readiness to learn while providing opportunities to re-teach the missing skills *before* beginning to teach.

A pre-assessment with a more comprehensive purpose would also verify that students have a solid grasp of important vocabulary and key terminology. Teachers need to know whether students are able to access the academic language necessary to be successful in the upcoming unit.

For example, the fourth grade curriculum requires students to identify, add and subtract equivalent fractions, thus to be successful, fourth grade students must understand the meaning of “equivalent.” It’s rare however, to hear students ask for an “equivalent” turn in the four-square game during recess! Likewise, asking middle or

high school students to demonstrate ‘voice’ in their writing requires that students understand the nuanced definition of ‘voice’ as a literary term. If a solid grasp of the academic language necessary for success in the upcoming unit is lacking, students will struggle with new material.

Finally, if the goal of a pre-assessment shifted from identifying a student’s level of mastery to one of informing teachers’ practice, teachers would need to know more than just who was and was not proficient. Teachers also need to know who was proficient on which aspects of the new material. Using pre-assessments for this purpose requires that teachers go beyond averages and look at each student’s performance on each individual learning target. Once teachers have identified the most essential learning targets for a unit, they can use pre-assessment results to understand what aspects of the upcoming unit need to be emphasized.

Rather than announcing that only two students were proficient, teams using pre-assessments to inform their practice might engage in a conversation that went something like, “Even though two students demonstrated proficiency on the pre-assessment, no one got all the questions right and everyone missed questions one and three. Were there any patterns in the students’ mistakes? Why did the students struggle with these particular concepts?” Having this kind of conversation about pre-assessment results would provide valuable insight into how to teach the upcoming unit.

“Pre-assessments are most useful when they seek to discover what students do know rather than confirming what they don’t.” -Juliet Bustos, (2015)

While pre-assessments will certainly identify those students that have and have not already mastered the content, if the goal of a pre-assessment was to *inform* a teacher’s instructional practice, there would be other priorities as well. Teams would design their pre-assessments to check a student’s readiness to learn, verify their understanding of important academic language, and identify which aspects of the unit need more time and attention. ■



Dr. Tom Many is an author and consultant. His career in education spans more than 30 years.

Resources

- Bustos, J. (2015, May 8). Pre-Assessments in the classroom; A quick overview of what pre-assessment should look like. Retrieved from youtube.com. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJSpChW9n8>.
- Byrd, I. (2011). Six traits of quality pre-assessments. Retrieved from <http://www.byrdseed.com/six-traits-of-quality-pre-assessments>.