

Informal Assessments

The word *assessment* is often used in a narrow sense to refer only to tests, quizzes, culminating projects, exams, and other graded assignments. In using a curriculum based on the principles of backward design, it can be helpful to view assessment as a much broader phenomenon, in which the teacher continually seeks to determine the depth of students' understanding. Because these more frequent assessments are not graded and are integrated into the routine of daily lesson plans, they may be considered to be informal.

Examples of informal assessments include the following:

- **Meet Me in the Middle** The teacher states a concept related to the unit of study, and the students walk toward the middle of a space, indicating the extent to which they believe they understand that concept *well enough to explain it to someone else*. In other words, students who are not at all familiar with the concept remain near the perimeter of the circle; students who feel 100-percent confident about explaining the concept walk all the way to the middle; and students whose understanding lies somewhere between these two extremes position themselves at an appropriate point between the perimeter and the middle. This activity can be used as a preassessment, as a formative assessment, or as part of a review process near the end of a unit.
- **Hand Signals** After completing study of a particular concept, ask the students to indicate the extent of their understanding of that concept: “thumbs up” indicates that they understand the concept well enough to explain it to others; “thumbs middle” indicates that they think they understand the concept but would feel uncertain explaining it to others; “thumbs down” indicates lack of understanding.
- **Red / Green / Yellow** Distribute a red card, green card, and yellow card to each student. Use these to administer a brief, ungraded quiz focused on material you have recently taught. Read a series of true-or-false statements and ask the students to respond with the appropriate card: green is true, red is false, yellow is unsure. This gives you a quick, visual overview of students' comprehension.
- **Index Card Feedback** At the conclusion of a lesson, or a portion of a unit, ask the students to write one or more of the following on an index card:
 - Three things they have learned today (or in this unit) that they did not know before
 - One or more questions they have about the material they are studying

Collect and review these index cards.

- **Sticky Note Feedback** Distribute sticky notes of two different colors to each student at the beginning of a class session. On one note, they write one sentence about something they believe they understand well from the previous class session. On the other note, they write one question they have about the material from the previous class session. The students post these in two different areas of the classroom that you have designated. This gives you a general indication of those content areas that the students understand and those about which they have questions. If you ask the students to write their names or initials on the sticky notes, you can follow up with those individuals if necessary.



Trust and Safety

When engaging in these and other informal assessment techniques, it is important that you create and maintain an atmosphere of trust and safety in your classroom. Students must know that they can admit they do not understand, without fear of reprisals from you or from their classmates. Similarly, it is essential that no grade be attached to these exercises. This enables students to relax and answer truthfully, giving you accurate information about the extent of their understanding.

Powerful Tool

When done well, informal assessment is a powerful tool for shaping your lesson plans and streamlining your teaching. It can help you to avoid the common pitfalls of spending too much time on material the students already understand, or of moving too quickly through more challenging concepts. Moreover, each of these exercises enables the students themselves to reflect on what they do and do not understand. Therefore, these informal assessments provide not only valuable information to the teacher, but also an effective means of *self-assessment* for students.

