Michigan Assessment Consortium

Learning Point

What types of assessment methods can support student-centered instruction?

Thoroughly describing what it might take to ensure that student-centered instruction becomes the dominant instructional pattern in American classrooms is a lengthy discussion. This learning point asserts that understanding the link between conceptually rich, student-centered classrooms and performance assessments is a single, but important, point of understanding because performance assessments promote the generation of the necessary evidence of students' conceptual understanding.

> "How to get classrooms to match visions of student-centeredness represents one of the most pressing challenges educators face. Part of this challenge is determining the proper use and forms of assessment when learning is student-centered."

Having an awareness of student learning has always been a key feature of teaching. Historically, teachers have used a variety of methods to gain some understanding of what students know and understand. These methods have reflected the common practices of classroom interaction in which teachers stand at the front of the classroom, deliver content, ask students to respond to numerous short-answer, factual questions, clarify any incorrect responses, advance the lesson, and then use tests to make summary judgments about student performance that result in grades (Cuban, 1993).

This pattern of instruction—described succinctly as "teacher centered"—has pro-found implications for all aspects of classroom life. For instance, when teachers remain at the center of instruction and demand only factual recall of information, superficial and shallow attempts to understand what students have learned will suffice. In other words, there is a link between the forms of teaching and suit-able assessment of student learning, and vice versa, since students know that when little deep thinking is required of them, even less demonstration of their skills is asked for. Thus, changing conceptions of quality instruction will have implications for classroom assessment.

Principles of student-centered classrooms

In recent decades, the belief that good teaching places students at the center of instruction has emerged and been widely agreed with, even if the actual teaching in most classrooms has remained primarily traditional. There is now wide agreement that "student-centered" classrooms should require students to be actively constructing knowledge rather than simply processing pre-packaged facts constructed by others. Memorizing that 9 x 7 = 63 is one thing. Understanding that 9 x 7 = 63 is a shorthand way of representing that 63 is the sum total of nine groups of seven is another. Furthermore, student-centered classrooms should feature activities that require students to actively construct disciplinary knowledge and make their understanding available to others (Lampert, 2001). However, historical evidence suggests that "student-centered" classrooms do not occur naturally, and that the few exceptions to the dominant teacher-centered pattern only demonstrate this (Kennedy, 2005). Teacher-centered classrooms are likely prevalent because teachers find student-centered classrooms (based on emerging student understanding) to be far more difficult to enact and sustain than standard (but undoubtedly still challenging) teacher-centered classrooms.

This information is aligned with the Assessment Literacy Standards at michiganassessmentconsortium.org

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The role of assessment in promoting student-centered classrooms

How to get classrooms to match visions of student-centeredness represents one of the most pressing challenges educators face. Part of this challenge is determining the proper use and forms of assessment when learning is student-centered. Since the 1980s, debate has raged about the role of assessment in improving teaching and learning and what types of assessment might provoke the greatest improvements. For instance, the past 25 years of school improvement policies have been based on the premise that large-scale assessments coupled with intense accountability for results will lead to large gains in student achievement. However, the hoped-for large gains have failed to materialize. On the contrary, evidence suggests that testing and accountability have pushed teachers to center classroom instruction more directly on themselves. Perhaps the primary reason for the disappointing results of the standards and accountability era is that the form and purpose of these assessments used simply do not provide teachers with the resources they need to elicit evidence of and respond to students' emerging conceptual understanding.

Rather than greater pressure for results, teachers need other tools to help them enact more student-centered classrooms through the use of assessments of and for learning. Performance assessments represent one potential tool, as they have a close relationship to student-centered, conceptually based classroom instruction. Performance assessments require students to demonstrate their understanding through their engagement in authentic tasks salient to practitioners in the discipline. This might include conducting a science investigation, comparing information from multiple historical source documents to write an essay, or using knowledge of physics to build a model roller coaster on a computer.

Performing tasks in this way makes the students' understanding visible to teachers in ways that teachers can use to propel student learning forward and enhance their conceptual development. Performance assessments, then, can reflect student-centered classrooms because they take student understanding seriously and make student understanding available for teachers to see and capitalize upon. In other words, performance assessment is an effective way that teachers can elicit evidence of student understanding and achievement.

Embedding performance assessment in a balanced assessment system

Performance assessment as described above should not be the only way teachers link assessment with conceptions of teaching. Rather, performance assessments should be embedded in instruction and complement other means of classroom assessment, especially the use of the formative assessment process in which teachers and students set clear learning targets, engage in conceptually rich activities, elicit evidence of understanding, incorporate feedback from self, peers, and the teacher, and make teaching and learning changes. While they are considering the important connection between student-centered classrooms and performance assessments, educators should also make plans to embed performance assessments in a balanced assessment system that includes the daily use of the formative assessment process, periodic benchmark assessments, and summative assessments.

Educators interested in initiating more student-centered classrooms should consider how performance assessment might be used to this end and embedded in a comprehensive, balanced assessment system.

References

Cuban, L. (1993). How teachers taught: Constancy and change in American classrooms 1880-1890. Teachers College Press.

Kennedy, M. M. (2005). Inside teaching: How classroom life undermines reform. Harvard University Press.

Lampert, M. (2001). Teaching problems and the problems of teaching. Yale University Press.

TO LEARN MORE

What constitutes a high-quality, comprehensive, balanced assessment system?
http://bit.ly/BalancedSystem

What do we mean by Formative Assessment?
https://bit.ly/LP-FormativeAssessment

Re-Balancing Assessment: Placing formative and performance assessment at the heart of learning and accountability (Hoffman, Goodwin, and Kahl, 2015)
https://bit.ly/3Cg2bXL

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