



Assessment: Authentic reflections of important learnings

This chapter will help teachers to:

- understand the cultural implications of classroom assessment and grading practices
- recognize the ways that culturally appropriate assessment can support the learning success of Aboriginal students
- develop multiple approaches to assessment that will support the learning needs and strengths of Aboriginal students.

Rethinking Assessment

While the purpose of traditional assessment, and marking and grading practices has been to sort, select and justify, current thought about assessment and current research on the relationship between assessment and learning now point to a different purpose—assessment for learning.

The focus on assessment for learning recognizes that effective assessment is not removed from the learning experience, but is embedded in authentic learning activities based on higher-order thinking skills, such as problem solving and analysis. Assessment for learning recognizes that students can be motivated to take increased responsibility for their own learning when they experience assessment as an integral part of the learning process.

Assessment for learning is authentic and based on brain-based research. It also requires a high degree of assessment literacy, meaning that teachers need to understand how to use multiple types of assessment strategies.

Authentic assessment

Authentic assessments reflect real learning that is meaningful to students. Authentic assessments:

- reflect understandings and abilities that matter in life
- are educational and engaging
- grow out of curriculum studies and are designed to do much more than “shake out a grade”
- present real-life, interdisciplinary situations

- pose complex, open-ended challenges that require integration of knowledge and skills
- often result in performances or presentations.

Assessment literacy

Assessment literacy includes:

- understanding and using multiple assessment methods, to ensure that the information gathered about student learning is complete and accurate, and that individual students have the opportunity to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways
- communicating assessment criteria and results effectively
- involving students as partners in the assessment process.

Brain-based research

The “brain-compatible” classroom provides five elements that facilitate learning (Chapman 1993). Brain-compatible or brain-based assessment pays attention to the same five elements. These elements include the following.

- **Trust and belonging**—Familiar environments, practice assessments and second chances all provide the comfort that students need during assessment activities.
- **Meaningful content and enriched environment**—Assessment activities are chosen because they promote learning, not because they are easy to score.
- **Intelligent choices**—Students have some choice about how they are assessed and all students are not required to show their achievement in the same way.
- **Adequate time**—Students need time to become familiar with assessment activities. They also need sufficient time to demonstrate their learning. Time-limited assessment is only valid when time is a critical element in the learning.

The new focus on authentic, brain-based assessments is a welcome development for Aboriginal students and their teachers.

The principles of authentic assessment and the principles of Aboriginal education share a number of common approaches and perspectives. The best practices fostered by assessment for learning effectively support the learning strengths and needs of Aboriginal students.

Culture and Assessment

Aboriginal students may bring a set of life experiences and responses to the classroom that are significantly different than those of most non-Aboriginal students. These learner characteristics determine the instructional and assessment strategies that will be the most effective for Aboriginal students. Aligning assessment approaches to match students' life experiences and culturally-based responses ensures that assessment practices are fair, inclusive and authentic, and that they contribute to student learning and overall sense of connection to learning.

Coming from cultures that value oral and observational learning, Aboriginal students may not be as comfortable with paper and pencil assessments as they are with other types of assessments. Written assessments may not allow them to demonstrate their learning as effectively as oral or presentational activities might.

Because of cultural values, Aboriginal students may be less comfortable and less likely to take part in class discussions or participate assertively in groups. They may more typically be quiet students and reflective learners.

Family and community commitments may also affect Aboriginal students' attendance and their ability to deliver assignments and projects on time, which in turn can affect their ability to demonstrate their learning. Births, marriages, deaths, community and spiritual ceremonies, and other events may result in many days of absence throughout the school year. Responsibilities for younger siblings and other family members may also take students' focus away from schoolwork.

As a result of these circumstances, Aboriginal students may be penalized by a number of common assessment practices, including:

- single rather than multiple assessment methods
- inflexible deadlines (with late penalties or "0" for incomplete assignments)
- time-limited assessments
- marks awarded for class participation and effort
- awarding zeros for incomplete or missing assignments
- failure to match testing to teaching
- surprising students with pop quizzes
- grading first efforts, rather than providing ample time for teaching, practice and feedback before evaluating products (Canady and Hotchkiss 1989).

If a student's absenteeism is adversely affecting that student's learning, discuss this with the student and his or her family. Work together to develop strategies that respect family and cultural values, and support improved attendance.

Fair grading practices

How can teachers ensure that cultural values and life circumstances do not compromise their Aboriginal students' opportunities to demonstrate their learning? Marking and grading practices that are appropriate and culturally aware are an effective place to start.

Many Aboriginal students can successfully meet curriculum requirements, especially when they have opportunities to use multiple assessment methods to demonstrate their learning.

Aboriginal students may struggle with:

- handing assignments in on time
- not having second chances
- being graded on personal and social characteristics, e.g., marks for participation.

Handing assignments in on time

There are many reasons why Aboriginal students may hand in late work. In addition to the cultural and family factors listed earlier, they are, like all adolescents, still learning time-management strategies and how to gauge the amount of work required to complete assignments.

Before using late penalties, teachers need to consider the following.

- Do late penalties produce on-time work in subsequent assignments or do they act as a disincentive for completing the work?
- Do late penalties allow for individual learning needs and personal challenges?
- Do they reflect real-world situations, e.g., does a missed deadline in a work situation result in a similar penalty?

Stiff penalties, such as losing 10 percent per day up to a maximum of 50 percent, distort student achievement and result in a grade that does not reflect what the student has actually learned. Lesser penalties of 1 percent or 2 percent a day up to a lower maximum are more effective in encouraging on-time work while still accurately reflecting student achievement (O'Connor 1999).

Teacher story

Meeting students halfway

“I accept late assignments. I encourage students to hand in as much as they’ve been able to complete. I mark the completed sections and the incomplete work separately. I grade the overall assignment and then I also grade the quality of the completed work. That way if a student gets 30% on the incomplete assignment, I can show them that they would have had a 70% or an 80% if they’d completed the work and handed it in on time.”

Need for second chances

Aboriginal approaches to education typically provide a student with repeated opportunities to observe, practise and master a skill, much like the apprenticeship model. Reflecting this approach in assignments and tests, teachers can offer students a second-chance assessment, giving them the opportunity to practise their skill and redo the assessment.

Teachers can support Aboriginal students in these circumstances by choosing to emphasize content rather than timing and by allowing students to complete missed tests and assignments.

Evaluating personal and social characteristics

Personal and social characteristics such as effort, participation and attitude are often related to cultural values. Aboriginal students may be quieter and less assertive than many non-Aboriginal students and, as a result, may receive lower grades when these characteristics are factored into an assessment.

In a similar way, motivation and attitude may be difficult to measure—apparent lack of motivation and an inappropriate attitude may reflect more on the cultural or personal relevance of a learning activity than on the personal development of the student.

For an accurate measure of Aboriginal students’ learning achievements relative to specific learning outcomes in the programs of study, personal and social characteristics should not be considered as part of the final mark or score of an academic task. It is more appropriate to assess and report on these aspects of learning in other ways, such as through anecdotal comments or as part of students’ learning conferences.

Sample strategies for increasing student success on tests and other assessment performance tasks

- Provide an in-class review for major tests to:
 - level the playing field for all students, regardless of how much support they receive at home
 - enable all students to perform better on assessment tasks
 - help students predict what material and tasks will be assessed
 - help students review effectively.
- Help students develop study plans for major assessments to:
 - ensure that assessments are integrated with classroom instruction
 - model learning strategies that students can use across the grades.
- Provide sample questions and practice tasks to:
 - give students opportunities to practise demonstrating their learning within these specific contexts
 - reduce the element of surprise and provide students with the information they need to effectively prepare to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.
- Give students a minimum of three days to prepare for major tests to:
 - give students the time they need to organize material, and review skills and concepts that may have been learned over several months
 - provide the time needed for students to engage in frequent and intense periods of study of 20 to 30 minutes per day (the optimal study schedule identified by research to deepen understanding of new material).
- Audiotape tests or use other assistive technology such as scan-and-read software for less-able readers to create opportunities for all students, whatever their reading level might be, to demonstrate their mastery of skills and concepts. Unless reading abilities are specifically being tested, success should depend on a student's mastery of the specific learner outcomes being tested, not on reading ability.
- Consider the limitations of multiple-choice assessment tasks. They may be easier to score and allow for more consistent scoring from one marker to the next, but developing items that are fair and valid can be challenging and time-consuming. Avoid poorly constructed multiple choice items that fail to measure understanding of a specific skill or concept, or are contrived or misleading. Using only a multiple-choice format on tests may not provide some students with a fair opportunity to show what they know. Students need a range of types of questions to show their learning.

- Be willing to clarify directions during tests because:
 - unless the assessment task is to specifically measure independent reading skills, weak reading skills should not be a barrier to demonstrating learning
 - when more than one student asks for clarification, the directions may be unclear; to be fair, teachers should clarify those directions for the whole class.
- Consider how time-limited tests can affect students' success.
Time-limited tests:
 - provide information on how quickly students can process information and develop responses
 - may be appropriate if speed is an important aspect of a skill
 - are not a valid part of a fair testing approach if their sole purpose is to differentiate high-ranking students from lower-ranking ones.
- Help students make themselves comfortable by allowing students to bring an item of significance that allows them to remain calm and focused. For example, they may find comfort in holding a rock given to them by an Elder who has said it will help them find their own strengths.

Effective Assessment Practices

The learning needs and strengths of Aboriginal students can be most effectively supported by assessment practices that:

- offer multiple methods of assessment
- state expectations and timelines clearly
- include elements of self-evaluation.

Multiple assessment

Multiple assessment methods are effective because they:

- create opportunities for Aboriginal students to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways, such as through presentations, creation of products or written work
- accommodate individual differences, learning preferences and learning strengths
- offer a more complete and multifaceted view of student learning, helping to minimize inconsistencies caused by such factors as discomfort with written assignments or the effect of completing a task on a day when the student was feeling stressed or distracted by personal issues.

Multiple assessment offers students a range of opportunities in a variety of formats in which to demonstrate their learning. These formats can be oral, written, presentational, visual, musical, performance-based—the list is endless. Different types of assessments can measure learning undertaken as a class, independently, in groups and/or in cooperative learning situations.

For example, multiple assessment options for a unit dealing with land claims could include:

- a group project researching and reporting on a local land claims issue
- a work of visual or performance art expressing the spiritual significance of the land to Aboriginal people
- a work of persuasive writing supporting a particular point of view about an historical or current land claim issue
- a short-answer test to review legal, historical and other information about the topic.

Examples of opportunities for multiple assessment include learning tasks such as:

- Venn diagrams
- mathematical word problems
- scripts for radio shows
- reactions to guest speakers, films or videos
- artwork/photographs
- storyboards
- presentations
- raps and poems
- reflective learning logs.

Clear expectations

Assessment practices that are effective support the learning strengths and needs of Aboriginal students by clearly and consistently reflecting learning outcomes. To ensure that assessment practices achieve this, consider the following strategies.

- Integrate assessment into the instructional planning process. This will ensure that assessment progresses naturally out of instruction and relates directly to learning strategies.
- Make sure that assessment is compatible with the instructional approaches used. For example, students learning to proofread and edit work should be assessed on a writing task that demonstrates these skills, not on multiple-choice questions about grammar and language use.
- Include students in the assessment planning process. Let them know why and how assessment information is being gathered.

- Give directions that are clear, complete and appropriate to the ability, age and grade level of the students. Be prepared to repeat and clarify directions.
- Show students examples of work and discuss why the work meets, exceeds or fails to meet expectations.
- Give students opportunities to practise assessment tasks or assignments so that the students become familiar and comfortable with them.

Rubrics as criteria for success

Rubrics are an effective form of assessment to use with Aboriginal students because they clearly and concisely convey assessment expectations. They show the student both the goal of the task and the steps to take in order to reach that goal. To use rubrics effectively with students, consider the following strategies.

- Present a rubric, or construct it in partnership with students prior to beginning the task or assignment.
- Help students examine and analyze samples of work that meet the rubric's various levels of criteria. Discuss how these examples could be improved through revision.
- Rubrics are especially effective in assessing presentations, performances, visual work, and more complex and comprehensive learning activities. When using rubrics for these tasks, it is important to ensure that the assessment criteria move beyond basic knowledge and comprehension, and into higher-order thinking skills that express an understanding of basic knowledge.

For a blackline master of a rubric template, see *Appendix 21: Rubric Template*.

Sample Scoring Rubric for a Venn Diagram

Standard of excellence / outstanding evidence

- Identifies many ways that two concepts are alike
- Identifies many ways that concepts are different from one another
- Uses precise, detailed vocabulary
- Information contains thought-provoking details
- Uses subheads to logically sequence and cluster information
- Clearly and creatively labels all parts of the diagram
- Has a descriptive and attention-getting title

Well on the way / strong evidence

- Identifies several ways that two concepts are alike
- Identifies several ways that concepts are different from one another
- Uses descriptive vocabulary
- Information contains interesting details
- Uses subheads to indicate sequence of information
- Clearly labels all parts of the diagram
- Has a descriptive title

Good start / some evidence

- Identifies some ways that two concepts are alike
- Identifies some ways that concepts are different from one another
- Uses appropriate vocabulary
- Information contains essential details
- Organizes information
- Labels main parts of the diagram
- Has an appropriate title

Just beginning / little evidence

- Identifies few or incorrect ways that two concepts are alike
- Identifies few or incorrect ways that concepts are different from one another
- Uses vague or incorrect vocabulary
- Information is missing essential details
- Minimal attempt to organize information
- Labels on diagram are incomplete
- Has an incomplete title or is missing a title

Self-evaluation

Student self-evaluation is an especially appropriate form of assessment for Aboriginal students because it encourages independent learning through the awareness and development of inner control and responsibility, both of which reflect strong cultural values.

Teachers may be reluctant to use student self-evaluation because they worry that it does not accurately assess achievement. However, recent studies (Rolheiser and Ross 2000) show that self-evaluation benefits students in a number of ways, including the following.

- Self-evaluation supports cognitive achievement, especially in narrative writing skills. By learning how to evaluate their own work, students become better writers.
- Self-evaluation builds motivation. Students are more likely to take responsibility for their work, to persist through challenges and to gain confidence in their own ability.
- Self-evaluation improves student attitudes towards evaluation. With age, students tend to become cynical about traditional grading methods, but when self-evaluation contributes to final grades, they are more likely to report that the overall evaluation process has been fair and worthwhile.

By creating opportunities for students to reflect on their own performance, self-evaluation provides teachers with information about student effort, persistence, goals, attributions of success and failure, and belief about competence that cannot be gathered any other way.

Self-evaluation, used as one form among multiple assessments, can assist teachers in identifying individual learning needs as well as opportunities for student success.

Some students, parents and teachers may feel that self-evaluation can lead to inflated grades and inaccurate measures of student learning. In fact, when students are taught systematic self-evaluation techniques, their judgement about their own performance becomes increasingly more accurate. When students are partners in establishing the criteria used to judge their work, their understanding of expectations improves, and the gap between their self-evaluation and teacher evaluation narrows (Rolheiser and Ross 2000).

wisdom

Shared

On offering encouragement

“From a traditional perspective, respect for choice is utmost, but healing is a collaborative process. Therefore, offer suggestions without offering directions. There is a difference between encouraging and pushing. And once again, with traditional Native youth, actions will always speak louder than words.”

– Garrett et al. 2003, p. 232