

NE710 Planning for learning in STEM teaching

Responsiveness over time

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Once upon a time: a tale of excellence in assessment

By Richard DuFour

After 10 years as a high-school social studies teacher, Peter Miller was convinced that kids were kids and schools were schools. So when his wife suggested they move across the country to be closer to her family, he willingly agreed. He applied at several schools and was offered an interview at Russell Burnette High School.

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The ability to write a well-reasoned, persuasive essay that incorporated historical evidence was one of the essential outcomes all history students were expected to achieve. So Peter followed the lead of his teammates and taught his students the rubric to ensure they understood the criteria they should use in judging the quality of their own work. He devoted class time to reviewing the rubric with his students, providing them with sample essays from the past, and leading the class in scoring essays of different quality.

Peter had already discovered the importance of checking for student understanding on an ongoing basis. He felt he was proficient in using classroom questions and dialogues for that purpose. He directed questions to students randomly, rather than relying primarily upon volunteers. He extended wait time whenever students struggled and refused to let any student simply declare he or she did not know the answer. He would prod, rephrase, ask them to explain their thought process, and insist they clarify exactly what they did understand and exactly where they were confused. Students soon learned that a simple shrug would not suffice for Mr. Miller. They also learned that he rarely affirmed or corrected an answer immediately. Instead, he would provide more wait time and then direct a student's response to several other students for analysis and

comment. He encouraged debate and insisted that students explain their thought process.

Peter did not limit his strategies for checking student understanding to questioning during class. He would typically begin each class by directing students to write in their notes, "At the end of today's class, I will be able to..." and asking them to explain how that day's lesson was linked to the essential learnings of the course. At the conclusion of the class he would pose a question, ask students to write a response in their notes, and quickly check each student's response to see if there was confusion. He frequently called upon students to identify similarities and differences between historical events and eras or to develop analogies between historical situations and contemporary events. He often presented a statement, challenged students to explain whether or not they agreed, and then used disagreements or confusion as an opportunity to clarify. He did not believe in giving homework every day, but when he did assign homework, he made a point of providing specific feedback to students. In short, Peter was confident his students were well-prepared when they took the team's first common assessment.

The assessment was in two parts. The first section included multiple choice and matching items, while the second presented an essay, question. Peter presented the results from the first part of the assessment to his department chairman and received two printouts the next day. The first showed how his students had performed on each skill and concept the team had assessed, compared to the performance of all the students who completed the assessment. The second printout presented an item analysis that compared the results of his students to all students on each item on the assessment.

The night before the next team meeting, Peter's wife asked how his classes were going. "Well, I'm generally pleased," Peter told her, "but on our common assessment, my students struggled with one concept distinguishing between different forms of government. Their scores prevented our team from achieving its target for that concept." He grimaced, "I'm not looking forward to admitting that tomorrow." Privately, he hoped he would be able to avoid saying anything.

The next team meeting was a revelation to Peter. Although each teacher had received only the analysis for his or her own students compared to the total group, teachers were extremely open with their results. "My students obviously didn't get the concept of republicanism," Miriam said. "How did the rest of you teach that?"

Various team members shared their strategies, then brought up the weak spots in their own students' performance.

Encouraged by their openness, Peter shared his concerns about his students' understanding of different forms of government. The team's response could not have been more positive. Frank and Miriam suggested instructional strategies. Ambrose offered a graphic organizer he had developed that had helped students use comparison and contrast to understand the concept. Skill by skill, concept by concept, the team reviewed student performance, identified whose students had excelled and whose students had struggled, and engaged in lively dialogue about strategies for teaching concepts more effectively.

The team then turned its attention to the item analysis and identified three items on the 30-item test that warranted review. The team quickly discovered that all three items assessed the same skill and that one of the items had been poorly written. They also discovered that the skill had been the last one taught in the unit. The team decided to rewrite the poorly written item and to change the pacing of the unit so members could devote more time to the skill prior to giving the next assessment.

Following the meeting, Peter asked Miriam, "What happens if we use all these strategies and as result, student performance on that skill reaches proficiency?"

"Why, we'll celebrate our success, of course," she said. "And then we'll look for the next items where students did less well. There will always be 'the lowest 10 percent' of items on any assessment we give. We attack those items, implement improvement strategies, celebrate our success, and then look for the next items. That is the beauty of continuous improvement. You never really arrive, but there is always a lot to celebrate."

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By the end of his first month at Burnette, Peter had come to the realization that he was not in Kansas anymore - this school was very different from those in which he had worked in the past. He had never experienced practices like working in teams, developing common assessments, aligning those assessments with state and national tests, using the results from previous assessments to guide instruction, identifying prerequisite knowledge for success in the unit, regrouping and sharing students, providing students with specific feedback rather than

grades, providing systematic interventions when students were unsuccessful, and allowing students additional opportunities to demonstrate proficiency.

The difference in the use of assessments was one of the most striking contrasts between Peter's past practice and his new school environment. In his former school, individual teachers had either developed their own assessments or simply used the assessments provided in the textbook and teacher's manual. There, administering a test signaled the end of a unit, and the purpose of the test was to assign grades. Students who did not do well were exhorted to do better and try harder, but they rarely received specific feedback on how to improve - and almost never were given a second chance to demonstrate their learning. Students and teachers alike understood that taking a test meant the unit was over, and the class would move forward.

At Burnette, however, assessments were used to determine if students needed assistance in acquiring prerequisite skills prior to teaching each unit, to inform individual teachers of the strengths and weaknesses in their instruction, to help teams identify areas of concern in the curriculum, to identify students who needed additional time and support for learning, and to give students additional opportunities to demonstrate that they had learned. Assessment seemed to represent the most critical component of the collaborative culture that characterized the school, and the way teachers used assessments sent students a clear message that they were required, rather than invited, to learn.