BACKWARD DESIGN AND ALIGNMENT OF ASSESSMENTS

Great teachers spend a lot of time preparing for class. We examine our curriculum and plan our lessons, being sure to incorporate activities that will engage our students and motivate them to learn. We gather materials and even think about the exact words we will say in front of our class. We spend a lot of time thinking about how a lesson will unfold, how to make the content relatable to our students, and who will be doing what tasks in our classrooms. All of these things help us stay organized and keep learners on task, but they do nothing to answer our most important question as educators: Are my students learning what I am teaching?

PLANNING WITH THE END IN MIND

As educators, we have to know where we are taking our students, and we have to be sure we keep them on track to get there. In order to really set a purpose for a lesson, we have to work backwards. When we start planning, our first step must be to think about what our students should be able to do at the end of a class, a lesson, or a unit. What will they be able to do *after* we have finished teaching? What skill should they be able to demonstrate? What content should they prove that they retained?

The task or activity we use to measure this final goal is called a summative assessment. **Summative assessments** are given after a set time period of instruction and aim to determine students' mastery of content (Cabral et al. 2007, 202). Setting a final, overarching goal and measuring it with a specific assignment or task helps us be sure the activities we include along the way will help students *meet* that goal. It also gives us a way to collect data that we can use to determine if our teaching was effective and if our students learned what they were supposed to learn during a unit of study.

Let's examine the following scenario. You are teaching your primary school students about the water cycle in an English medium science class. At the end of the unit, you want your students to demonstrate understanding of the five steps of the water cycle. How will you know for sure that your students have learned this content?

Lesson planning that aims to collect data and prove that students have mastered content starts with a plan for summative assessment. For more information about effective lesson planning, view the Shaping the Way We Teach English Webinar Lesson Planning 101: Mapping Activities for a Clear Path to Learning.

ALIGNING SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS WITH LESSON GOALS

What will your students do at the end of this unit to show that they have, indeed, learned the five steps of the water cycle and know what happens during each one? Let's take a look at some possible ways of assessing what they learned. As you read these, remember the goal and decide which summative assessment does the best job of measuring whether students have met the goal.

- A. Draw an example of part of the water cycle you see in your own life. Write a few sentences to tell what is happening and which part of the cycle it is.
- B. Label the steps of the water cycle on a worksheet with illustrations.
- C. Write a paragraph about why the water cycle is important and at least five different ways you use water in your life.
- D. Arrange illustrations of each step of the water cycle correctly on a poster and label all of them. Write a paragraph to explain the cycle, telling what happens in each step.

If we look back at the goal, "Demonstrate understanding of the five steps of the water cycle," we can analyze each of these potential assessment activities to see if they really measure what students were supposed to learn. If we examine the wording of the goal, we can determine that the word *demonstrate* means that students should produce or do something. The word *understanding* implies that they must do more than simply remember the steps; they instead must show that they know what happens during each of the five steps.

While activity A encourages students to recognize the water cycle in the context of their own lives, it does not ask them to recall five steps or show that they know what happens during each one. The labeling exercise in activity B only measures whether students remember vocabulary, not what takes place in the steps of the water cycle. Activity C asks students to list ways they use water and why the cycle is important, which does not show that they know the steps or how the cycle works. Activity D requires students to correctly arrange the cycle, label it with vocabulary and then explain, in writing, what happens in the cycle. If students can successfully complete activity D, it will prove that they have learned the material and understand what happens in the five steps of the water cycle. Because it is aligned with the goal, activity D is the best summative assessment task to determine whether students have learned the content.

This is one example of a summative assessment activity that fits with a particular scenario. Many school districts, curriculum publishers, or education departments also create summative assessments, which are often tests. While tests can certainly provide valuable numerical data about student learning or areas for improvement, there are some more authentic tasks that also allow students to demonstrate their knowledge. Next week, we will take a look at some more ideas for summative assignment tasks, using rubrics to score them, and aligning the remainder of your lesson activities with your lesson goals.

Reference

Cabral, Robin, Socorro G. Herrera, and Kevin G. Murry. Assessment Accommodations for Classroom Teachers of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students. First ed. Boston: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon, 2007.