

Listening to the Data

Students are talking to you through their assessments. Are you listening?

By: Bobb Darnell



Teaching and assessing today's students is just not the way it used to be. Why? Because the students are not the way they used to be. To be effective educators, we need to consider the students who sit in our classrooms today and recognize how they learn.

Call them Generation Me, Generation Z, or just call them "this generation of kids," they are digital natives who cut their teeth on a high-speed, high-tech, high-touch, interactive world. This generation is motivated by achievable challenges. They actually thrive on assessment and improvement. They play video games or participate in sports or other organized activities for hundreds of hours to "get good" at them.

They are clear about the objectives and goals of their leisure activities. They learn the special terms and develop the skills and strategies required to achieve those goals. They use immediate feedback to reflect on their strategies and their progress and welcome practice and "do-overs" so they can improve their skills and knowledge. Yet their approach to goal attainment outside school may conflict with the way their teachers try to help them attain academic goals in school.

Perhaps students are trying to tell us what it is that they need to improve their learning. Average and above-average students may be whispering to us through their effort and performance, and underachievers may be yelling at us through their assessment results and learning behaviors.

What Students Are Saying

After talking with hundreds of students and teachers, looking at a multitude of assessment results, and observing learning and assessment behaviors during the past few years, I have determined that students are communicating four important messages about their classroom assessment and learning needs. If we pay attention to these messages, however intense, we can learn to use assessment more effectively to promote student motivation and higher achievement.

Here's what I believe students are saying.

1. Please show us the essential concepts, vocabulary, and skills in each unit and clearly communicate the learning goals.

Today's students need to see the big picture, the structure and organization of what they are learning and doing. They need to see the vocabulary, essential knowledge, and skills to understand how things fit together and for what purpose. The big picture gives them a sense of safety, which allows them to



take learning risks.

They are goal-directed and want to know the goals and objectives at the beginning, during, and at the end of the activity. They want to know at every moment whether they are winning—it's the winning that motivates them.

Assessment-literate teachers identify essential concepts, topics, and skills, which they use as the basis for matching instruction to goals and for creating ways to assess student learning. They respond to students' big-picture needs by providing tools, like graphic organizers (See Figure 1), to show students the structure and organization of the unit components and how all those pieces fit together. Without the structures, learning seems random, chaotic, and overwhelming to some students—like trying to put together a 1,000-piece puzzle without the picture on the box.

Assessment-literate teachers also clearly define and display learning goals (Figure 1). Many students over-study or give up because they don't know what they are really supposed to know and should be able to do. When they don't know what it takes to learn successfully, students of all ability levels can become discouraged, unmotivated, and even defiant.

Using these practices demonstrates to students that teachers are responsive to their learning needs and styles. When teachers match their learning expectations with their instruction and assessments, students learn to trust them and take learning risks. Students become optimistic, hopeful, and motivated to attain a goal when they believe they have a chance to win.

Object Properties	Target Properties	Area and Angles	Circumference
• center	• tangent	• inscribed	• circumference
• inscribed	• point of tangency	• central angle	• diameter
• radius	• perpendicular	• inscribed angle	• chord
• inscribed angle	• radius	• central angle	• pi
• inscribed angle	• inscribed polygon	• inscribed arc	• perimeter
• radius	• inscribed	• inscribed	• area
• inscribed arc	• inscribedly tangent	• inscribed	
• inscribed	• inscribedly tangent	• inscribed	
• inscribed		• inscribed	
• inscribed		• inscribed	
• inscribed		• inscribed	

Skills to be learned by:

1. Define and use unit vocabulary.
2. Describe properties of circles.
3. Describe properties of polygons.
4. Describe properties of tangents and tangent circles.
5. The application of tangents.
6. How an arc, tangent, and chord in an original drawing.
7. Describe the relationship between the circumference of a circle and its diameter.
8. Apply the formula for circumference of a circle.

Figure 1.

2. Please use a variety of assessments that have real-life connections and show and tell us the characteristics of a great product or performance.

The pressure for their students to perform well on high-stakes tests often prompts teachers to create multiple-choice assessments that mirror the standardized tests. Because students believe these assessments don't really give them the opportunity to show and apply what they have learned, they are not motivated to complete assignments, are reluctant to study for tests, and fail to work to their potential.

Assessment-literate teachers vary their assessments, using product and performance assessments and authentic tasks to give students opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and apply what they've learned. Product and performance assessments that have real-life connections allow students to integrate their knowledge and skills, provide opportunities for personalization, promote the development of higher-level thinking skills, and offer more engagement than traditional tests. These assessments can spark students' intrinsic motivation when they involve relevant issues and intriguing situations, encourage problem solving and decision making, and promote creativity.

Today's students are curious and love the achievable, hands-on challenges that product and performance assessments can provide. But teachers must use the learning goals as the basis for choosing the appropriate assessment tool and method. They should not use product and performance assessments simply because students may be more engaged in these assessments.

Students also want to know what they need to do to succeed—how they can win. They need rubrics that describe each level of proficiency. They also need exemplars of high-quality work and performance to guide their own work.

Students rarely play games without knowing how to win. They become frustrated and give up when they don't have guiding criteria. Students will perform better when they know and have what they need to succeed.



3. Please assess us often, covering smaller amounts of information at a time and giving us feedback about our progress.

Today's students are accustomed to continuous feedback and immediate gratification—when they play video games or sports, they know every minute how they are doing. They are motivated by the progress they see. We can help them feel this way about classroom learning and assessment, but not if we make them wait days before we give them feedback about their progress. They need to know how they are doing so they can adapt their strategies immediately and experience progress.

Assessment-literate teachers recognize the differences between long- and short-cycle assessments. They know that teaching for five or more days before assessing learning is not as effective as monitoring students' progress daily and making timely instructional decisions to address learning needs.

Yes, it is challenging to grade and return student work quickly. Teachers need to learn to manage the paper load and use a greater variety of formative assessments that don't require them to evaluate students formally. Teachers can use exit slips, summaries, graphic organizers, mini-quizzes, self-assessment, and checklists to inform students about their current progress.

As they learn to use assessment and feedback to gauge their progress and learn to reflect about strategies and performances, students come to believe they have some control over their learning.

4. Please analyze the assessment results to determine my strengths and weaknesses, teach me strategies to improve, and let me redo or retake assessments.

Many things can distract us from analyzing classroom assessment results more thoroughly. We often are glad to be able to just grade the assessments, get them back to students in a timely manner, and record the scores. We know it's important to analyze the results, yet we frequently lose the opportunity to determine the reason for them. Students depend on us to review the results and determine possible reasons for their low or unexpected performance. Was it questionable assessment items, mismatches between instruction and assessment, or a lack of student's prerequisite knowledge or skills? Students especially want us to recognize that they lack the learning-to-learn strategies and skills they need to succeed.

Assessment-literate teachers identify students' strengths and weaknesses and use the information to modify instruction and help students achieve. They use correctives such as reteaching, alternative instructional materials, small-group study sessions, individual tutoring, and computer- and media-assisted instruction to reduce knowledge and skill gaps.

Teachers also can provide enrichments to students who are ready to excel, such as tutoring peers, developing instructional materials for their peers, and completing special projects and assignments. This approach is more consistent with the way students engage in continuous improvement out of school.

Assessment-literate teachers analyze assessment results to determine which learning-to-learn skills and strategies students need. Students can't win at school without strategies like storing and retrieving information, acquiring vocabulary and concepts, reading and writing to learn, and listening and taking notes. Students can become more involved in the assessment process and succeed if they learn to self-assess, establish goals and plans, adjust strategies, and self-advocate.

Teachers also can create an assessment environment that increases student motivation to learn if they permit students to retake or redo selected assessments after completing correctives or learning new strategies.

If we require students to redo or retake assessments to meet standards, we can reduce big gaps in knowledge and skills that students may require for subsequent learning. Students can accept responsibility for their learning and persevere when learning is challenging. They have little problem committing to many hours of practice and do-overs at home. Why not capitalize on these dispositions and behaviors in school?

A Winning Strategy

Our knowledge of students' assessment behaviors and habits for learning should inform and encourage us to become more committed to becoming assessment literate. We just have to listen to students and observe their learning behaviors to realize that today's students are not who they used to be. If we listen attentively and respond to their learning needs, we can ensure more students win at school. And when that happens, teachers win as well.

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Table 1: Examples of an IIR (Information) and Learning (Knowledge) Algorithm

Algorithm/Process	Input/Process	Output/Result
1. Data collection	1. Data collection	1. Data collection
2. Data cleaning	2. Data cleaning	2. Data cleaning
3. Data analysis	3. Data analysis	3. Data analysis
4. Data visualization	4. Data visualization	4. Data visualization
5. Data interpretation	5. Data interpretation	5. Data interpretation
6. Data communication	6. Data communication	6. Data communication
7. Data evaluation	7. Data evaluation	7. Data evaluation
8. Data reflection	8. Data reflection	8. Data reflection
9. Data application	9. Data application	9. Data application
10. Data innovation	10. Data innovation	10. Data innovation



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