

Fred Jones on Assessment for Learning: The Sooner the Better

“In education, this is the age of assessment,” says author/consultant Fred Jones in this *Tools for Teaching* broadside. “In this anxiety-driven environment it would be useful to step back for a moment and take a fresh look at the nature of assessment. How can it be made to work for you and your students?”

Too much attention is being paid to high-stakes standardized tests and teachers’ summative tests, says Jones. Using short-term strategies to pump up test scores doesn’t produce long-term learning gains. Even when teachers take students’ class work home, grade it, and return it the next day, there are problems – witness the number of papers that wind up in the classroom recycle bin. “The students are sending a message,” says Jones. “It is very difficult to profit from feedback on Tuesday for something that happened on Monday... In giving corrective feedback, *delay is death*. When corrective feedback is delayed, error is learned and then must be unlearned.”

Far more effective is focusing on assessments that provide feedback in real time on students’ daily work. “If you want students to embrace corrective feedback,” he continues, “it must *decrease* their workload. It must make learning *easier*. To make learning easier, corrective feedback must occur *while the student is doing the task*. It must serve as a quick and timely mid-course correction that helps the student ‘do it right the first time.’”

For this to happen, instruction must be built around assessment. Jones recommends three basic steps within each lesson:

- Divide the lesson into a series of bite-size learning-by-doing steps.
- Have students do each step as soon as you teach it (we learn by doing).
- Watch carefully and give corrective feedback as needed.

Five essential steps make this work in a busy classroom with more than a few needy students:

- *Teacher mobility* – “If you want to see what is going on, you must *move!*” says Jones. Working the crowd, as he calls it, allows the teacher to spot learning problems and suppress goofing off.
- *Room arrangement* – Jones advocates getting away from the desks-in-rows arrangement and clustering desks so the teacher can look at all students’ work taking as few steps as possible.
- *Efficient corrective feedback* – Many teachers make the mistake of spending 3-8 minutes re-explaining the lesson to confused students one by one, which prevents the teacher from getting around the class and reinforces what he calls the “helpless handraisers.” Instead, teachers should focus corrective feedback on the answer to one simple question: *What do I do next?* “Be clear, be brief, and be gone,” says Jones.
- *Visual instructional plan* – A step-by-step lesson plan should be posted at the front of the room, prepackaging the corrective feedback for struggling students and allowing for 5-10-second interventions. Working with other teachers to construct visual instructional plans sharpens teachers’ skills in designing lessons as a series of input-output steps.

• *Inconspicuous discipline* – “When the teacher says the name of a disruptive student,” says Jones, “everyone looks up. Discipline management has now become theater.” But if the teacher is constantly moving around the classroom delivering short bursts of corrective feedback, he or she can deal with disruptive behavior in a whisper and other students don’t even notice.

“Making Assessment Work for You” by Fred Jones in a *Tools for Teaching* broadside, May 2011, <http://www.fredjones.com>.