

## **A Middle School Uses On-the-Spot Assessments to Differentiate**

In this important *Middle School Journal* article, James Madison University (VA) professor Kristina Doubet describes a rural middle school that was not making adequate progress despite a heavy training focus on differentiation. Teachers were pushing back on differentiation, says Doubet: “It seemed daunting – even impossible – to regularly accommodate the wide range of readiness needs exhibited by their diverse student body. Some faculty members believed that weaving differentiation into daily lesson plans was simply not a realistic possibility because they feared pigeonholing students, were confused about how to incorporate additional scaffolding and challenges, and were frustrated with the ever-present pressures of time constraints.”

The principal and instructional coach decided to make a tactical shift from focusing on differentiation to focusing on on-the-spot (a.k.a. formative) assessment – checking on students’ learning in bite-sized chunks during instruction. Teachers had previously been trained to plan lessons around KUD – know, understand, and be able to do – so when this was presented in an end-of-summer PD session, teachers saw it as a logical next step. However, while they had no problem coming up with assessment questions on K and D – factual knowledge and skills –they struggled with formulating good assessment questions on U – understanding the big ideas and essential concepts of a lesson.

What to do now? The leadership team asked teachers to practice crafting all three types of on-the-spot assessment questions and then, at the next grade-level meeting time, bring an assessment they’d used and discuss how it had gone. Trial and error crafting questions turned out to be an excellent “coach.” What was most valuable was looking at actual student responses to the various exit tickets, quick quizzes, and short written responses teachers had used. “I loved seeing everyone else’s examples,” said one teacher. Teams zeroed in on glitches in some of the assessments as revealed by students’ less-than-perfect responses. “The need to choose questions carefully is critical in order to get the information you need,” said another teacher.

The instructional coach was pleased with how these teacher discussions went: “They asked genuine, trying-to-figure-it-all-out questions, took notes, and shared a lot of information and tips among themselves.”

The leadership team’s next step was asking teachers to give another quick assessment and bring the instrument and the results to a grade-level team meeting. Teachers arrived with a wide variety of assessments, and in the conversations that ensued, helped each other improve the prompts so they focused specifically on what they wanted to measure. For example, this 3-2-1 exit ticket...

- 3 ways to prevent global warming
- 2 possible effects of global warming
- 1 question you still have

was revised to more accurately measure the intended learning outcomes:

- 3 *causes* of global warming

- 2 things you can do to *prevent* global warming
- 1 possible *negative effect* global warming may have on your health

“At the same time,” says Doubet, “teachers were realizing the importance of articulating the know (K), understand (U), and be-able-to-do (D) objectives before designing assessments.” An eighth-grade teacher said, “Using the KUDs really helps me stay focused in my planning.”

Teachers were impressed by the wealth of information they got from short assessments – how quickly and clearly they identified student misunderstanding and confusion and how much more timely and efficient these assessments were than traditional 25-question unit tests. The time devoted to constructing and reviewing these assessments was time well spent.

Up to this point, however, teachers were using on-the-spot assessment data to make decisions about *whole-class* instruction – not to differentiate according to the varying needs of their students. “It was time for teachers to start looking at assessment results in terms of the patterns they saw emerging within each class,” says Doubet, “and then to use these patterns to determine groups and tasks to address learning gaps and strides revealed in these patterns.” The instructional coach asked teachers to give another formative assessment and come to team meetings prepared to discuss how they had used the results to form groups and provide different tasks for those groups.

To the coach’s delight, teachers immediately made the leap of connecting quick assessments to differentiation. “In essence,” says Doubet, “the faculty had reintroduced themselves to differentiation, and they seemed quite pleased with the connection... Differentiation was no longer a nebulous and hypothetical concept; rather, it was a natural response to actual student needs as revealed by non-threatening assessment measures... [T]hese teachers had inductively and independently come to adopt and even embrace the philosophy of assessment that is held by teachers in regularly differentiated classrooms.” At the end of the year, teachers were eager to expand their repertoire of on-the-spot assessment techniques and learn more about how to scaffold instruction and follow up with subgroups of students.

“For a faculty that was ‘differentiation weary,’” concludes Doubet, “this year of staff development had provided growth, motivation, and direction. Through focusing on formative assessment, they had come to see that differentiation is not a big, scary monster; rather, it naturally occurs when teachers set goals, see where students are in relationship to those goals, and respond accordingly. This realization opened teachers’ eyes to the possibility that differentiation could, indeed, be part of their daily instruction rather than a strategy reserved for large, cumulative projects. It helped them know their students better and made them want to respond to their students’ needs appropriately. It also helped them know themselves better as teachers and see themselves as learners.”

This initiative seems to have been a contributing factor in significant gains in student achievement at the school that year.

“Formative Assessment Jump-Starts a Middle-Grades Differentiation Initiative” by Kristina Doubet in *Middle School Journal*, January 2012 (Vol. 43, #3, p. 32-38), no e-link available; Doubet can be reached at [doubetkj@jmu.edu](mailto:doubetkj@jmu.edu).