

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Assessment That Makes Sense

*Practical Techniques That Guide Instruction
and Improve Student Achievement*

by
Steve Peha


teaching that makes sense
www.ttms.org



© 1995-2010 by Teaching That Makes Sense, Inc. Some rights reserved.

Please Use This Stuff

Just follow the rules. Thanks!

1. YOU MAY use this Work or any portion thereof for non-commercial purposes only. No individual or entity shall profit from this Work but for the intellectual benefit that may accrue by its conscientious application. No fee may be charged in connection with the use or dissemination of this Work; nor may any fee be charged to any participant in any event where this Work is used or disseminated, whether such event is conducted in person or via electronic means; nor may any fee be charged, including tuition, to any person where this Work is used or disseminated by any institution, representative, or affiliate thereof. To request a commercial use license, click here to contact us at info@ttms.org.

2. YOU MAY copy and distribute this Work, or any portion thereof, by any non-electronic means, as long as this Work is not altered in any way other than coloring, reduction, enlargement, or binding.

3. YOU MAY incorporate this entire Work or its contents into any other work. Any work containing this Work or its contents shall be bound by the same rights as this Work, shall be considered a derivative work based on this Work, shall include the text of this agreement in paragraphs 1-5 and the URL of this Work, and shall bear the following notice: © Copyright 1995-2010 by Teaching That Makes Sense, Inc. Used by permission. For more information, contact us at info@ttms.org.

4. YOU MAY NOT distribute this Work electronically or post it for electronic distribution or download. You may, however, send or post a link to this Work using its URL in the *Teaching That Makes Sense Free Learning Project Library* below:

<https://ttms.box.net/shared/static/eha4a178rd.pdf>

5. The rights enumerated above extend only to material to which *Teaching That Makes Sense, Inc.* holds applicable permissions.



“Learning begins with teaching that makes sense.”

What is TTMS?

A Brief Explanation of Teaching That Makes Sense

Teaching That Makes Sense® works with people who are passionate about learning. We provide the following services:

- Pre-Service and In-Service Teacher Training Workshops
- Summer Professional Development Institutes
- In-Classroom Model Teaching, Co-Teaching, Observation, and Planning
- Curriculum Design and Program Evaluation
- Instructional and Administrative Coaching
- Educational Leadership Training and School Improvement Strategy

We work at all grade levels, K-12, and across the curriculum, in all kinds of schools. We specialize in the implementation of research-based practices that can be scaled easily from a single classroom to an entire district.

Since 1995, we have worked with over 20,000 people in over 500 schools and other learning organizations throughout the United States and Canada.

We provide support to teachers and learners using the most sensible methods and materials available. Our goal is to increase academic achievement by making teaching easier for teachers and learning more meaningful for kids.

You can learn more about *Teaching That Makes Sense* by visiting our website at www.ttms.org.



“Learning begins with teaching that makes sense.”

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Featured Downloads

The Best of Teaching That Makes Sense

To view our entire library of free teaching materials click [here](#).



“Learning begins with teaching that makes sense.”

Featured Workshops

The Best of Teaching That Makes Sense



Writing Strategies For Every Classroom.

In this highly interactive workshop, you'll be introduced to an innovative set of writing strategies that will help your students make dramatic improvements almost instantly.



Helping Writers Master Mechanics.

Got problems with punctuation, grammar, and sentence structure? Kids don't like to edit? Get proven tools based on what writing conventions really are and how real writers really learn them.



Read Non-Fiction Now! Non-fiction texts make up most of the reading we pursue in our daily lives but fiction dominates in school. Give your students the skills they need to succeed across the curriculum and out in the world.



Comprehensive Comprehension. Explore techniques that dramatically improve reading comprehension without traditional tests, tedious questions, dreary worksheets, and other inauthentic unmotivating methods.



Mastering Basic Math Facts. How is it that so many kids sneak into 5th or 6th grade without mastering their basic math facts? With a set of innovative activities, kids can master basic facts quicker than you ever thought possible.



Math Problem-Solving Power. Serious math involves serious math problem-solving. And that means students need serious problem-solving strategies. Teach math the way mathematicians teach it and give kids an edge.



Grading That Works For Everyone. Stop spending hours grading papers. Use a research-based approach to grading that's fair, fast, accurate, highly motivating for kids, and—this is the best part—much easier for you.



Assessment That Makes Sense. Learn how to use the key principles of effective assessment to gather information that guides instruction in less time and with fewer interruptions in your everyday teaching.

To schedule a workshop for your school or district click [here](#).

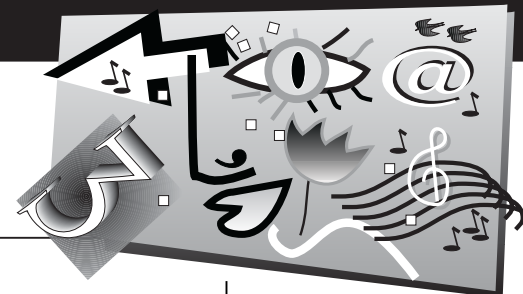


“Learning begins with teaching that makes sense.”

Assessment That Makes Sense Part 1 of 6

If you've experienced frustration sorting fact from fiction in the never-ending national dialog on educational testing, this series should clear up some of your confusion.

By Steve Peha, President of Teaching That Makes Sense



What Are We Talking About Here?

The frustrating thing about assessment is figuring out what it is. Do I assess my students by giving them a test? Are grades a form of assessment? Is the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) test an assessment because it has the word "assessment" in the title?

People think of assessment as many different things. For teachers, administrators and policy-makers, it's hard to make sense of assessment when there's so much confusing information going around. Parents and kids don't get it either.

In a world where every tissue is a Kleenex, every copy a Xerox, and language evolves according to its

use, most people think of assessment as a synonym for testing. To test children is to assess them. And what's more, it's the only way to assess them because only precise numbers can precisely assess learning. Or so it goes.

But true assessment has little to do with gathering statistical information about student learning and everything to do with how we use that information.

Assessment is the gathering of information for the purpose of guiding instruction. If the information we gather doesn't directly inform our teaching, then it's not true assessment. The truth is that the vast majority of data generated by testing individual students is never used to determine the

specific instruction those students should receive.

Take the traditional spelling test, for example. One student gets 100%, one student gets 75% and one student gets 50%. Is it likely that these three students will receive appropriately differentiated instruction based on their scores? No. So how does the test help the teacher or the students?

And that's the problem: what we call assessment is often something else that is taking up our valuable time and precious resources, and gives us little in return.



Steve Peha is a student of great teaching and a teacher of great students. He is the president of Teaching That Makes Sense, a national consultancy specializing in literacy, assessment, teacher training, and education technology. He lives in Carrboro, NC with his wonderful wife, Margot Carmichael Lester, and their dog, Ursa. You can contact him at stevepeha@ttms.org.



©1995-2000 by Steve Peha. Used by permission. Copies may be made for non-commercial purposes only.

Example

Assessing Assessment

You know you're assessing when:

- I looked at my students' last published writing pieces. I noticed many kids having trouble with run-on sentences. They're using "and" and "then" like periods.
- In our last reading conference, I noticed Mary Anne had trouble decoding longer words because she read too quickly.
- I noticed Josh still uses finger counting as his main strategy for adding and subtracting even when working with two-digit numbers.

You know you're not assessing when you're thinking:

- My students can't punctuate sentences because they did poorly on our grammar worksheet.
- Mary Anne is a low reader because she couldn't answer the questions about the story we read in class.
- Josh is very slow in math. When we do our "math-a-minute" worksheets, he completes far fewer problems than the others.

What's a Good Assessment?

A good assessment:

- Uses specific and appropriate language to describe the data gathered and the patterns that are observed.
- Uses direct references to actual student work and behavior.
- Is based on authentic data gathered in an authentic manner from within an authentic context.

Before you do any assessing, ask yourself this question: "How do I plan to use the information I am gathering to guide my instruction?"

If you don't know what you're going to do with the data, don't waste time gathering it. Assessment is extremely time consuming; it shouldn't be done casually. And it should only be done to determine what to teach next.

If you're gathering information about your students to come up with a grade, you're making two mistakes at the same time: (1) You're spending valuable time and energy gathering information that has little or nothing to do with your teaching or your students' learning, and (2) You're using that information to form ill-considered judgments about your students that could have serious consequences for their future.

Beginning Activity

Talk to your students about the assessments you conduct, and how you use that information to determine what you teach next. Help them to see that you have a specific rationale for what you ask them to do, based on what you need to know to teach them effectively.

In the Newspaper

Take a look at business, sports or weather information in The Seattle Times and have students make assessments. Help students draw solid conclusions based on data and not on conjecture. Help them distinguish between meaningless assessments and those providing good value.

On the Web

You'll find more information about assessment in The Seattle Times NIE section of the Teaching That Makes Sense Web site. You can even download free copies of articles or send them to your friends via e-mail. Just go to www.ttms.org.

For more information about NIE, visit seattletimes.com/nie.



Newspapers In Education

The Seattle Times

Assessment That Makes Sense, Part 1 of 6

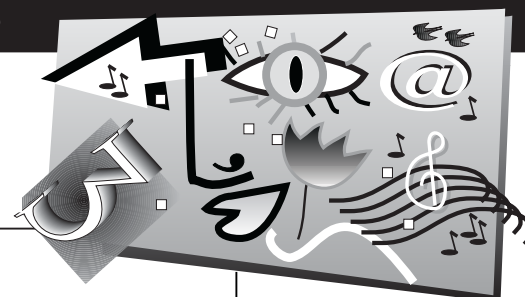
The Effective Learning Series is part of a 35-week curriculum for improving basic thinking skills. Useful for teachers, home schoolers, parents and students alike, new issues appear in The Seattle Times on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. If you missed any in the series, you can order back issues by calling Circulation at 206-464-2001.

Assessment That Makes Sense

Part 2 of 6

If you've experienced frustration sorting fact from fiction in the never-ending national dialog on educational testing, this series should clear up some of your confusion.

By Steve Peha, President of Teaching That Makes Sense



What is Authentic Assessment?

The word "authentic" simply means "real." *Authentic assessment is a real way of gathering performance information that a real person would really use in the real world.* So what does that really mean? Well, if you break it down and apply it to the activities you assess in your classroom, you can think about it this way:

A real way of gathering real performance information ...

How is information gathered about this activity in the real world? What information is worth gathering? Why do people in the real world do this?

... that a real person ... What role does this person play in the real world? In the real world, what is the assessor's relationship to

the person being assessed? How does the assessor communicate assessment information to the person being assessed?

... would really use ... What information can be gathered without affecting the results? What information can be used to guide our instruction? How is specific instruction connected to specific outcomes?

... in the real world. How is this assessment information used in the real world? What are the assessor's ultimate real-world goals? What is the value of the assessment process?

No classroom assessment is ever 100% authentic. The best we can do when gathering information about our students is to ask ourselves these questions and do our best to answer them.

Authenticity determines the reliability of the assessment information you gather. The more authentically it is gathered, the more it will help you figure out what to teach.

Whenever possible, try to base your instructional decisions on information you have gathered in an authentic way. Try also to reduce the amount of time, effort and energy you put into inauthentic methods of gathering assessment information such as tests, worksheets, textbook exercises and so on.



Steve Peha is a student of great teaching and a teacher of great students. He is the president of Teaching That Makes Sense, a national consultancy specializing in literacy, assessment, teacher training, and education technology. He lives in Carboro, NC with his wonderful wife, Margot Carmichael Lester, and their dog, Ursa. You can contact him at stevepeha@ttms.org.



Example

What is an Authentic Activity?

Once you see the value of authentic assessment, you begin to see the necessity of having students pursue authentic activities. But what exactly is an authentic activity?

An authentic activity is something real that real people in the real world really do, done the way real people really do it, for real reasons that really matter. Think of it this way:

Something real ... Is the activity performed in the real world? Can I show the kids a real world model? Can we develop real world criteria to describe the process and/or the result?

... that real people in the real world really do, ... Who does this? Can we learn about real people who do this real activity? Under what circumstances do they do it?

... done the way real people really do it, ... How do real people do this? What is their "work process"? What strategies do they use to solve the problems they encounter?

... for real reasons that really matter. Why do people do this? Who is the audience? How can we provide a "real world" social context for this activity?

There's nothing wrong with doing inauthentic activities. We do them all the time in our own lives. In the classroom we do them to build community, ease tension or just to have fun. Not everything we do in school need be authentic, nor is there any such thing as a completely authentic school activity. (School is artificial, after all.) But authentic activities should account for most of what our children do in school because the more authentic an activity is, the more likely it is that children will develop authentic skills by doing it.

Intermediate Activity

Talk to kids about authenticity. Tell them how things done in school relate to real things outside of school; how writers really write, how readers really read, and how scientists and mathematicians go about their work. And do your best to model classroom practice on the real world.

In the Newspaper

Have students understand The Seattle Times to find things people do in the real world that they could pursue in class. The newspaper features every kind of professional career or pastime. It is a fair representation of the world around us and a good model we can use for instructional content.

On the Web

You'll find more information about assessment in The Seattle Times NIE section of the Teaching That Makes Sense Web site. You can even download free copies of articles or send them to your friends via e-mail. Just go to www.ttms.org.

For more information about NIE, visit seattletimes.com/nie.



Newspapers In Education

The Seattle Times

Assessment That Makes Sense, Part 2 of 6

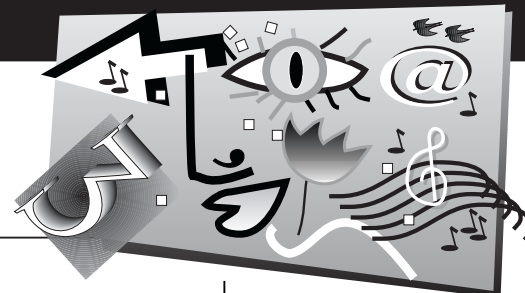
The Effective Learning Series is part of a 35-week curriculum for improving basic thinking skills. Useful for teachers, home schoolers, parents and students alike, new issues appear in The Seattle Times on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. If you missed any in the series, you can order back issues by calling Circulation at 206-464-2001.

Assessment That Makes Sense

Part 3 of 6

If you've experienced frustration sorting fact from fiction in the never-ending national dialog on educational testing, this series should clear up some of your confusion.

By Steve Peha, President of Teaching That Makes Sense



A Medical Model of Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting

A man goes for a physical. The doctor requests certain tests. A week later, the doctor receives results indicating that the patient has a certain condition. The doctor notifies the patient and recommends a course of treatment. During that course of treatment, doctor and patient communicate to determine its effectiveness and to make adjustments as needed.

While teaching isn't exactly like doctoring, we could probably all take a lesson from our GP when it comes to assessing, evaluating and reporting student learning.

Conduct Meaningful Assessments

Doctors have strong rationale for the tests they conduct. They know that

testing is expensive, time consuming and sometimes uncomfortable. The same is true of testing in the classroom.

Evaluate the Problem, Propose the Solution

Imagine how frustrating it would be if you were told by your doctor that you had a problem — and that was it. No advice, no course of treatment. No information about how the problem arose or what to do about it in the future. Fortunately, most of the time, doctors provide a specific course of action as part of their evaluation. Educational evaluations should be the same. There's nothing more frustrating than knowing something is wrong and not knowing what to do about it.

Provide Purposeful Reporting

When doctors report their findings, they do so with specific purposes in mind. Generally, they are concerned with the patient's understanding of what they have to say. They want to make sure the patient has the information he or she needs to participate fully and effectively in the course of treatment. If parents and students had information like this, they might not only feel better, they might do better when it comes to resolving problems and making progress.



Steve Peha is a student of great teaching and a teacher of great students. He is the president of Teaching That Makes Sense, a national consultancy specializing in literacy, assessment, teacher training, and education technology. He lives in Carrboro, NC with his wonderful wife, Margot Carmichael Lester, and their dog, Ursa. You can contact him at stevepeha@ttms.org.



Example

What is Evaluation?

Evaluation is decision-making based upon the information gathered through assessment. You know you're evaluating when you're thinking something like this: "From the assessment data I gathered, I can see my kids are not doing well with sentence punctuation."

An evaluation is only as valuable as the action taken in response to it. You know you're responding well to an evaluation when you're thinking something like this:

"Because I noticed that many kids were not using periods and capitals correctly, I'll teach some sentence punctuation mini-lessons in writing and support that with simple inquiry activities during reading time where I'll have the kids identify sentence boundaries by ear using expressive reading techniques."

A good evaluation: (1) includes a specific plan of action; (2) uses the assessment data as its rationale; (3) values the work, not the worker.

Before you create an evaluation, ask yourself this question: "How do I know the plan I have outlined will address the needs I have identified through assessment?"

What is Reporting?

Reporting is the way assessment and evaluation information are communicated to others. You know you're reporting when you find yourself sharing your assessment and evaluation information with a parent, a student, a teacher, or an administrator.

A good report: (1) Is presented in a form that is accessible to its intended audience and written in language they understand; (2) References authentic student work; and (3) Provides its audience with information that can be used to construct specific solutions to issues of concern.

Before you produce a report, ask yourself these questions: "What is my purpose in sharing this information? What do I want my audience to do with it?"

Advanced Activity

Using the criteria supplied in the example on good evaluations and good reports, talk with your students about the evaluations and reports you give them. Help students understand the purpose of your evaluations and how you choose to report your evaluations to them and to their parents.

In the Newspaper

The Seattle Times articles are full of evaluations and reports. Do these follow the guidelines for effective evaluation and reporting? Does the news media do a good job of gathering and supplying all the information its readers need to understand the evaluations and reports they read?

On the Web

You'll find more information about assessment in The Seattle Times NIE section of the Teaching That Makes Sense Web site. You can even download free copies of articles or send them to your friends via e-mail. Just go to www.ttms.org.

For more information about NIE, visit seattletimes.com/nie.

Assessment That Makes Sense, Part 3 of 6

The Effective Learning Series is part of a 35-week curriculum for improving basic thinking skills. Useful for teachers, home schoolers, parents and students alike, new issues appear in The Seattle Times on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. If you missed any in the series, you can order back issues by calling Circulation at 206-464-2001.



Newspapers In Education

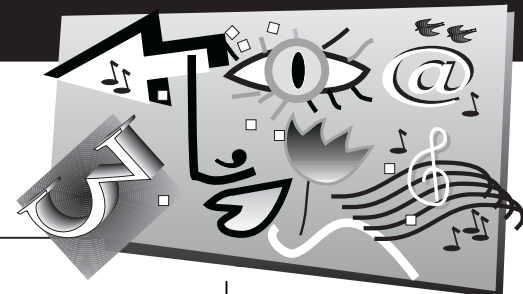
The Seattle Times

Assessment That Makes Sense

Part 4 of 6

If you've experienced frustration sorting fact from fiction in the neverending national dialog on educational testing, this series should clear up some of your confusion.

By Steve Peha, President of Teaching That Makes Sense



Criteria-Based Assessment

In the 1990s, educators got a great idea: Why not tell kids what we want them to do before they start doing it? And so the age of criteria-based assessment was born. Now it seems that kids use criteria to do just about everything.

In the good old days, teachers would give assignments and students would do their best to hit the mark, often guessing as to what exactly the teacher was looking for. Teachers for their part were often frustrated about the gap between what they wanted and what students produced.

Providing kids with tangible written information describing the quality of work expected of them goes a long way toward reducing guesswork for

both teacher and student. It also helps parents get a better notion of what their kids are doing (or not doing) in class. But it doesn't necessarily improve assessment.

It's not Assessment Unless...

Just saying that you're doing criteria-based assessment doesn't make it so. And neither does a criteria list. Often, teachers create criteria simply for the purpose of determining a grade. Using criteria solely as a means of grading does little for assessment.

To use criteria for true assessment purposes, teachers must use their criteria and their students' performance relative to those criteria to determine appropriate instruction. All too often, students are assessed against the

criteria for a given project and then, regardless of how they do, the teacher moves on to a new area of study.

If we use criteria merely as another form of grading, we're confusing the issue and hurting our kids. The real value in criteria comes not from the existence of high standards and clear targets, but from the tangible framework they provide for explicit instruction.



Steve Peha is a student of great teaching and a teacher of great students. He is the president of Teaching That Makes Sense, a national consultancy specializing in literacy, assessment, teacher training, and education technology. He lives in Carrboro, NC with his wonderful wife, Margot Carmichael Lester, and their dog, Ursa. You can contact him at stevepeha@ttms.org.



©1995-2000 by Steve Peha. Used by permission. Copies may be made for non-commercial purposes only.

Example

Criteria for Criteria

The success of criteria depends on how we make them and how we use them. When *creating* criteria, keep these three things in mind:

- (1) Base criteria on authentic models.** When we think about developing criteria, our natural instinct is to begin creating a description of what we'd like students to do. But this is backwards. It makes more sense to start with a model and then create a description based on the work in front of us.
- (2) Develop the language with the students.** Most of the time, teachers like to make up their own criteria and present them to students. But this isn't the best way to go. It's much more effective to give students a hand in creating their own criteria based on authentic models.

(3) Keep the criteria list as short as possible. Once a list of criteria items gets beyond 8 or 10, it becomes unwieldy. Kids can't remember it easily and readily apply it to their work. Some teachers like to create full blown rubrics with separate descriptions for different levels of performance. It's better to create one set of criteria representing the best performance and have students concentrate on that.

When *using* criteria, think about these three things:

- (1) Teach criteria items explicitly.** For each item on your criteria list, offer students explicit instruction. Just use your list as a list of lessons and make sure students understand what each item means, why each item is important, and how to produce each item in their own work. Lack of explicit instruction is the number one reason kids fail criteria-based assessments.
- (2) Teach students to self-assess.** The criteria are more valuable to the students than to the teacher. In some cases, the criteria themselves may represent the learning we want kids to achieve. The only way for criteria to be truly helpful to students is if they know how to apply those criteria accurately to their own work.

(3) Use results to guide instruction. Once students have produced work using the criteria, don't just record it in a grade book and move on. Look at how the class performs as a whole and use the results to determine further instruction. Having a good set of criteria provides a solid instructional framework. But if you don't use the assessment data to guide new instruction, that framework has little value.

Beginning Activity

Take a look at a set of criteria you've created recently and see how it compares with the advice given in the example. Then, try another set in front of the kids using an authentic real world model. See if this approach produces more useful criteria.

In the Newspaper

The Seattle Times has many great models of writing you can work with to create interesting criteria. Take different types of stories and work with students to create small sets of criteria for each one. Encourage students to connect their criteria with actual text from the articles.

On the Web

You'll find more information about assessment in The Seattle Times NIE section of the Teaching That Makes Sense Web site. You can even download free copies of articles or send them to your friends via e-mail. Just go to www.ttms.org.

For more information about NIE, visit seattletimes.com/nie.

Assessment That Makes Sense, Part 4 of 6

The Effective Learning Series is part of a 35-week curriculum for improving basic thinking skills. Useful for teachers, home schoolers, parents and students alike, new issues appear in The Seattle Times on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. If you missed any in the series, you can order back issues by calling Circulation at 206-464-2001.

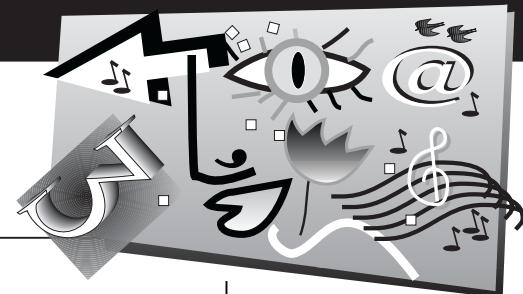


Assessment That Makes Sense

Part 5 of 6

If you've experienced frustration sorting fact from fiction in the neverending national dialog on educational testing, this series should clear up some of your confusion.

By Steve Peha, President of Teaching That Makes Sense



How Does Grading Relate to Assessment?

Grading is a form of evaluation not assessment. It's a judgment of a single performance or a group of performances averaged over time. Grading fails as an assessment tool for several reasons:

(1) Grades are reductive. No human learning can be reduced to a single value without distorting it. Grades restate the actual learning that has occurred in a way that is essentially meaningless.

(2) Grades are arbitrary. Different teachers assign grades in different ways. Even when criteria are used, the interpretation of the criteria and the final translation into a letter or number is highly subjective.

(3) Averages are misleading. What does it mean to say that over a nine-week period, someone has learned 82% of something? The fact that most final grades for a course are arrived at through averaging means that the result of most grade-based evaluations makes little sense in terms of actual student learning.

(4) Students can't use grades to improve performance. How does one change a "B" into an "A"? What exactly is needed in terms of knowledge gained or skills acquired? Grades don't give students the information they need to improve.

(5) Teachers can't use grades to determine instruction. What instruction does a "B" student need in order to improve? How does the

grade indicate the instruction he or she should receive? Grades don't tell teachers what students have learned and what they need to learn next.

(6) Grades do little for students and even less for teachers. There is no significant research that supports letter grading. It exists as a tradition only, a tradition that should be questioned and then discarded in favor of approaches that help teachers teach, help students learn, and help parents make good choices about the education of their children.



Steve Peha is a student of great teaching and a teacher of great students. He is the president of Teaching That Makes Sense, a national consultancy specializing in literacy, assessment, teacher training, and education technology. He lives in Carboro, NC with his wonderful wife, Margot Carmichael Lester, and their dog, Ursa. You can contact him at stevepeha@ttms.org.



©1995-2000 by Steve Peha. Used by permission. Copies may be made for non-commercial purposes only.

Example

If You Have to Grade...

Dubious tradition that it is, grading has been with us for decades and, like most of the ill-considered traditions of education, it will probably be with us for generations to come. But this doesn't mean that we should continue to grade in ways that hurt and confuse our students. If we're going to grade, we should develop simple and fair systems that emphasize the learning we value most.

The Three Ps

The Three Ps approach to grading works as well as any approach to grading could. The teacher arrives at a grade by evaluating a student's participation, progress and performance.

A Three Ps system might look like this:

(50%)	(33%)	(17%)
Participation	Progress	Performance
Attends class each day.	Improves in ability to:	Produces writing that is equal in quality to the best writing of other students at this grade level.
Follows directions. Shares writing regularly.	Use writing strategies independently.	Quality is determined by reference to authentic student writing samples and classroom writing criteria.
Offers constructive feedback to others.	Know when own writing needs to be revised.	
Maintains a writer's notebook.	Edit own writing and the writing of others.	
Completes portfolio requirements	Choose good writing topics.	
	Write in different forms.	

These criteria are established during the first week of school, in consultation with students, and apply to a set of work that students would create over time and assemble in some kind of portfolio.

The weighting of the three areas incentivizes students to focus on participating well in class and making good progress. In this sense, even the best students still have to work hard and learn new things to receive high grades.

Students are taught to assess themselves with this approach and participate in their own final grading. Each student submits his or her own evaluation in each area, along with a brief explanation of how they arrived at their opinion, to which the teacher's grade can be averaged.

Intermediate Activity

Introduce the Three Ps model to kids and ask them what they think of it. Ask them to tell you what they think about being graded on things other than just their final performance. Talk to them about what you value in students and point out that there's more to life than doing well on tests.

In the Newspaper

For an exercise in the ridiculousness of grading, have kids grade various pieces in the The Seattle Times. Like ads, sections, or even whole editions. Have them and then try to justify themselves. Imagine what it would be like if the newspaper used a grading system. Point out to them that in the real world, we don't use grades. We use other rating systems.

On the Web

You'll find more information about assessment in The Seattle Times NIE section of the Teaching That Makes Sense Web site. You can even download free copies of articles or send them to your friends via e-mail. Just go to www.ttms.org.

For more information about NIE, visit seattletimes.com/nie.



Newspapers In Education

The Seattle Times

Assessment That Makes Sense, Part 5 of 6

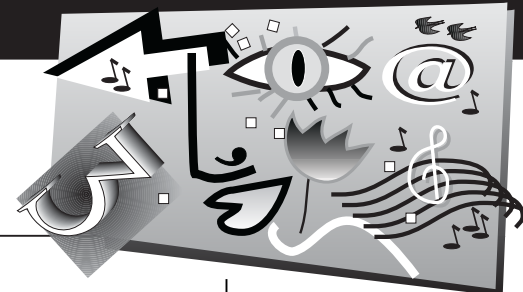
The Effective Learning Series is part of a 35-week curriculum for improving basic thinking skills. Useful for teachers, home schoolers, parents and students alike, new issues appear in The Seattle Times on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. If you missed any in the series, you can order back issues by calling Circulation at 206-464-2001.

Assessment That Makes Sense

Part 6 of 6

If you've experienced frustration sorting fact from fiction in the never-ending national dialog on educational testing, this series should clear up some of your confusion.

By Steve Peha, President of Teaching That Makes Sense



Putting it All Together

The key to effective assessment, evaluation, and reporting is to determine the information we need. Too often, we spend time gathering and recording information that isn't very useful. Fortunately, common sense (something all too rare in this area of education) tells us that we need only track five types of information:

(1) Strengths. We need to know what each student is good at because new learning is always related to previous learning. Every student has strengths, and it is part of a teacher's role to identify and nurture them. Students who are not exhibiting strengths need different work to do.

(2) Accomplishments.

To assess learning, we need to know what students have done. We need authentic work samples and some informal accounting of the circumstances by which they were created.

(3) Goals. By looking at what students can do and how they do it, we can determine where they need to go next. This is the heart of the assessment process. To teach effectively, teachers need to have clear learning goals for all students. Students and parents also need to be aware of these goals.

(4) Instruction. Once a teacher has made an assessment, he or she has the task of planning appropriate instruction.

Specific instruction should be targeted to help specific students reach specific goals.

(5) Support. Students need help outside of class to reach their goals. Parents often want to help but don't know exactly what to do. Support information is vital if teacher, parent, and student are to work together effectively.

The advantage of recording information in this format is that assessment, evaluation and reporting can be accomplished simultaneously in an integrated fashion.



Steve Peha is a student of great teaching and a teacher of great students. He is the president of Teaching That Makes Sense, a national consultancy specializing in literacy, assessment, teacher training, and education technology. He lives in Carboro, NC with his wonderful wife, Margot Carmichael Lester, and their dog, Ursula. You can contact him at stevepeha@ttms.org.



©1995-2000 by Steve Peha. Used by permission. Copies may be made for non-commercial purposes only.

Example

SAGIS: An Example of Assessment That Makes Sense

The SAGIS approach (pronounced "say-jiss") is a method of assessment, evaluation, and reporting that works well for teachers, students and parents alike. The key to this approach is that it displays information directly, in common language, without resorting to complex calculations or criteria.

In the SAGIS approach, teachers keep track of five important types of student information: Strengths, Accomplishments, Goals, Instruction and Support.

Here's a SAGIS report for a 3rd grader in writing:

Strengths

- Chooses good topics.
- Listens attentively during sharing and asks good questions.
- Uses audience feedback to improve his pieces.
- Reads own writing expressively.

Accomplishments

- Has published: personal narrative, autobiography, a book review, movie review for class newspaper, and writing contest piece. Has a second book review in drafting.
- Fairly accurate self-assessment.
- Has begun touch typing practice.

Goals

- Share earlier in the writing process to avoid re-starts
- Use more editing strategies to avoid complete re-copying/re-writing.
- Meet deadlines regularly: his perfectionism is getting in the way of his ability to complete tasks.

Instruction

- Conference with him early in the writing process to more closely monitor his progress on individual pieces.
- Help him see that he is often using commas in place of periods.
- Conference with him during editing to review editing marks and their uses.
- Encourage him to use editing marks instead of re-copying.

Support

- Watch closely for perfectionist tendencies. Make sure he doesn't try so hard on things that he misses out on learning opportunities.
- Monitor how often he wants to redo things from scratch at home.
- Monitor your interactions with him around school and non-school activities to assess where he might be developing his concerns about perfectionism.

Advanced Activity

The SAGIS approach can be used on just about any activity. Introduce it to students and have them assess themselves on something they feel they are good at. Ask them to articulate the kinds of instruction and support they would like to read their goals.

In the Newspaper

Take a look at several days of the newspaper and have your students perform a SAGIS assessment of the paper as a whole. See if they can come up with sensible goals and ideas for instruction that the people who make the paper would understand and appreciate. Stress the importance of constructive comments and point out that there's nothing negative in the SAGIS format.

On the Web

You'll find more information about assessment in The Seattle Times NIE section of the Teaching That Makes Sense Web site. You can even download free copies of articles or send them to your friends via e-mail. Just go to www.ttms.org.

For more information about NIE, visit seattletimes.com/nie.



Newspapers In Education

The Seattle Times

Assessment That Makes Sense, Part 6 of 6

The Effective Learning Series is part of a 35-week curriculum for improving basic thinking skills. Useful for teachers, home schoolers, parents and students alike, new issues appear in The Seattle Times on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. If you missed any in the series, you can order back issues by calling Circulation at 206-464-2001.

Learning Patterns

Teach Smarter Not Harder

Imagine a structure 13 years tall, 180 days wide, and five subjects deep. This is a K-12 education. Each cell in this structure represents a single class period in a single subject for a total of 11,700 educational opportunities.

By using *Teaching That Makes Sense® Learning Patterns™* we can reduce this academic load for students, simplify planning and instruction for teachers, and help more kids learn more things in less time and with less teacher effort.

Learning Patterns are cross-curricular tools optimized for successful teaching in any subject or grade. They are designed to be used, re-used, and shared across classrooms without requiring extensive training or preparation.

By analyzing standards documents and the methods of effective teachers, *Teaching That Makes Sense* has identified underlying commonalities in learning targets across the curriculum. These commonalities represent dozens of potential assignments that can be taught and learned through a small set of foundational skills.

Consider exposition. Students consume and create expository information in many ways: they read expository texts, write expository essays, create reports, answer test questions, etc. As varied as expository expression is, it has a simple underlying structure that can be explained by a single *Learning Pattern*.

Some *Learning Patterns* cover skills like narration, exposition, and persuasion. Others help teachers and students with things like assessment, reading comprehension, and memorization. The same patterns can be used across grade levels and subject areas as well, so kids take their learning with them as they grow.

For more information about Learning Patterns click [here](#).



“Learning begins with teaching that makes sense.”

Agile Transformation

Building Collective Capacity for School-Wide Change

We are discovering better ways of improving schools by doing it and by helping others do it. Through this work, we have come to value:

- **People.** *Individuals and interactions* over policy and politics;
- **Achievement.** *Maximum potential* over minimum competence;
- **Courage.** *Fierce collaboration* over comfortable compromise;
- **Agility.** *Responding to change* over following a plan.

The items on the right are important, but we value the items on the left more.

Agile Transformation is grounded in two principles: **(1)** People are more successful when they enjoy their work; and **(2)** Schools are more successful when they support people in developing the autonomy, competence, and relatedness that makes their work more enjoyable. Features of *Agile Transformation* include:

- **Paired Practice.** Nobody works alone. Everyone has a team and a teammate.
- **Rapid Iteration.** Sprint through big problems one small problem at a time.
- **Making Sense.** What do we do? Why do we do it? How do we know it works?
- **“Stand Up” Sessions.** What did you do yesterday? What are you doing today? What do you need to be successful? Agile leaders remove impediments.
- **Successful Failure.** Fail fast, fail smart. No blame games. Apply what you learn as you move closer to your goal with each iteration.
- **Souls and Roles.** Aligning what we do with who we are.
- **“Just in Time” Solutions.** Handle problems as they arise. Respond as needed.



“Learning begins with teaching that makes sense.”

Essential Elements of Agile Schools

The Qualities of Effective Educational Communities

1. **Agile schools work because people choose to make them work.** We believe in freedom of choice, and that making the choice to participate fully in teaching, learning, and leading is the most important choice we can make.
2. **Agile schools love to learn.** We believe that learning is inherently enjoyable and that giving learners a responsible degree of autonomy in their individual pursuit of knowledge and skill makes it even more so. Agile educators are learners, too.
3. **Agile schools take a constructive approach to failure.** We believe failure is a normal part of success. Kids struggle to learn. Teachers struggle to teach. Administrators struggle to lead. We all experience failure on the way to solving new problems. The faster we fail, the more solutions we try. The smarter we fail, the more knowledge we bring to the next iteration. Instead of looking back at problems, Agile schools look forward to solving them.
4. **Agile schools are always getting better.** We believe there's almost always a better way of doing something, and that it's almost always worthwhile trying to figure out what that better way is. Agile schools value progress, and the appropriate measurement thereof, because progress is the true indicator of learning.
5. **Agile schools empower people to empower others.** We believe that individuals—not systems or policies—are the true sources of power in our schools. Our responsibility is to use our power in service of the greater good, and to teach students how to use their power that way, too.
6. **Agile schools achieve extraordinary results.** We believe in transformative learning that goes far beyond incremental improvements in test scores. Adults in Agile schools also strive for extraordinary achievement in their profession as well.



“Learning begins with teaching that makes sense.”

Essential Elements

continued...

7. **Agile schools are based on deeply-held beliefs, clearly-articulated values, and a firmly-rooted sense of commitment.** We believe that the most successful schools are those run by people who know what matters most to them and who possess an unshakable determination to get it.
8. **Agile schools are communities where people make a difference and connect with something greater than themselves.** We believe that the drive to contribute is part of human nature. Our role is to guide people in directing their contribution toward its highest and best use.
9. **Agile schools value ownership, positive attitudes, high expectations, and unwavering optimism.** We believe that making a good life is about making good choices, that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right, and that self-mastery is the key to its rightful exercise.
10. **Agile schools embrace the risk inherent in the achievement of great things.** We educate for maximum potential not minimum competence. We believe that all learners have within them extraordinary strengths and untapped resources, and that learning is only limited by our willingness to attempt what has never before been attempted. We welcome change, we innovate, and we seek out challenges that organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.
11. **Agile schools affirm self-knowledge as the most valuable knowledge and self-determination as the most basic right.** We believe that introspection, self-disclosure, and intellectual honesty are essential to personal transformation. We seek to support young people in becoming the adults they want to be.
12. **Agile schools are communities where no one is above the rules, everyone has a voice, freedom is sacred, equity and excellence are not mutually exclusive, and the highest goal of education is contributing to the present and future well-being of individuals who can thrive independently in a modern democracy.** Agile schools value college preparation, career fulfillment, and engaged citizenship, but we value something else even more. Collegiate, career, and civic achievement are important, but they are means to ends, not ends in themselves. Human happiness, meaningful contribution, and sustained well-being of self and community are the ultimate ends to which Agile schools aspire on behalf of the children and families we serve.



“Learning begins with teaching that makes sense.”

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE



“Learning begins with teaching that makes sense.”