

Classroom Assessment: Every Student a Learner

Used with skill, assessment can motivate the reluctant, revive the discouraged, and thereby increase, not simply measure, achievement.

For many of us, *assessment* is probably not at the top of the list of topics when we think about what we want to spend time learning. But we would guess that, in the last few years, you may have been called upon to do one or more of the following things, each of which may have left you wishing for a stronger understanding of why it is important to do or of how to do it well.

- Develop common assessments with other teachers in your subject area or grade level.
- Work with a team to “deconstruct” the new Common Core State Standards to help identify what should be the content of daily instruction and assessment.
- Attend a Response to Intervention (RTI) training and then make a presentation to the rest of the faculty on the benefits for students.
- Focus on differentiated instruction this year as a strategy to help more students master content standards.
- Use more formative assessment in the classroom because the research says it will work.
- Move to a grading system that centers more on communicating what students know and can achieve and removes from grades such nonachievement variables as attendance, effort, and behavior.

All of these actions, along with many other currently popular school improvement initiatives involving assessment, are aimed at raising student achievement in an era of high-pressure accountability testing. Each action requires classroom teachers to have classroom-level assessment expertise to carry them out effectively. And yet the

opportunity to develop that expertise may not have been available to you through preservice or inservice offerings.

Without a foundation of what we call *classroom assessment literacy*, few if any of these initiatives will lead to the improvements we want for our students. Assessment-literate educators understand that assessments can serve a variety of important *users* and fulfill *purposes* in both supporting and verifying learning. They know that quality assessments arise from *crystal-clear achievement targets* and are designed and built to satisfy specific *assessment quality control* criteria. Those steeped in the principles of sound assessment understand that assessment results must be *delivered into the hands of the intended user* in a timely and understandable form. Finally, they are keenly aware of the fact that assessment can no longer be seen merely as something adults do to students. Rather, students are constantly assessing their own achievement and acting on the inferences they draw about themselves. Assessment-literate educators know how to *engage students in productive self-assessments* that will support their learning success.

We have framed these components of assessment literacy, derived from the expertise of the measurement community, in terms of five keys to assessment quality. Each chapter will focus on one or more of these keys to quality. Each chapter includes activities you can complete individually, with a partner, or with a team to put the principles of assessment literacy into action in your classroom. By the end of your study, you will have the expertise needed to handle any classroom assessment challenge.

Chapter 1 Learning Targets

At the end of this chapter, you will know the following:

- What the five keys to classroom assessment quality are
- Why they are important to assessment accuracy and effective use of assessment information

CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT LITERACY

We define *classroom assessment literacy* as the knowledge and skills needed to do two things: (1) gather *accurate* information about student achievement, and (2) use the assessment process and its results *effectively* to improve achievement (Figure 1.1).

FIGURE 1.1 Definition of *Classroom Assessment Literacy*

The knowledge and skills needed to

1. Gather accurate information about student achievement.
2. Use the assessment process and its results effectively to improve achievement.

When people think about assessment quality, they often focus on the accuracy of the instrument itself—the extent to which the assessment items, tasks, and scoring rubrics produce accurate information. This is a key feature of assessment quality, but it gives a far from complete picture of what we have to understand to use assessment well in the classroom.

You may be surprised to know that teachers can spend up to 30 percent or more of their classroom time in assessment-related functions. No wonder—consider all of the things that go into and make up the classroom assessment process:

- Planning and managing both formative and summative assessments in the classroom
- Identifying, clarifying, and teaching to valued learning targets
- Designing or selecting high-quality assessment items and tasks
- Devising high-quality scoring keys, guides, and rubrics
- Using assessment results to plan further instruction
- Offering descriptive feedback during learning
- Designing assessments so that students can self-assess and set goals
- Tracking student achievement along with other relevant data
- Setting up a system so students can track and share their progress
- Calculating grades that accurately represent student achievement at the time they are assigned

When viewed as a larger picture, we see that the accuracy of assessment items, tasks, and scoring rubrics is only one slice of the pie. Prerequisites must be in place to ensure accuracy of results. In addition, classroom assessment quality requires that we use the assessment process and its results effectively. If our assessment practices don't result in higher achievement, we would say a component of quality is missing. And, because accurate assessment skillfully used benefits learning, this expanded definition of classroom assessment literacy must become part of our understanding of what it means to teach well. Figure 1.2 shows the expanded definition as an “Assessment Literacy Pie.”

KEYS TO QUALITY CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT

All of the pieces contributing to sound classroom assessment instruments and practices are built on a foundation of the following five keys to quality:

1. They are designed to serve the *specific information needs of intended user(s)*.
2. They are based on clearly articulated and appropriate *achievement targets*.
3. They *accurately measure* student achievement.
4. They yield results that are *effectively communicated* to their intended users.
5. They *involve students* in self-assessment, goal setting, tracking, reflecting on, and sharing their learning.

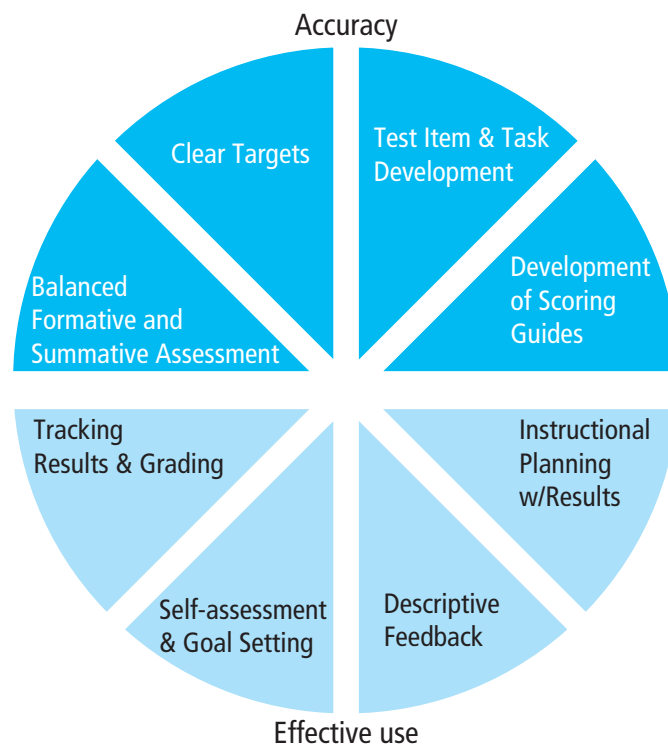
FIGURE 1.2 Components of Classroom Assessment Literacy

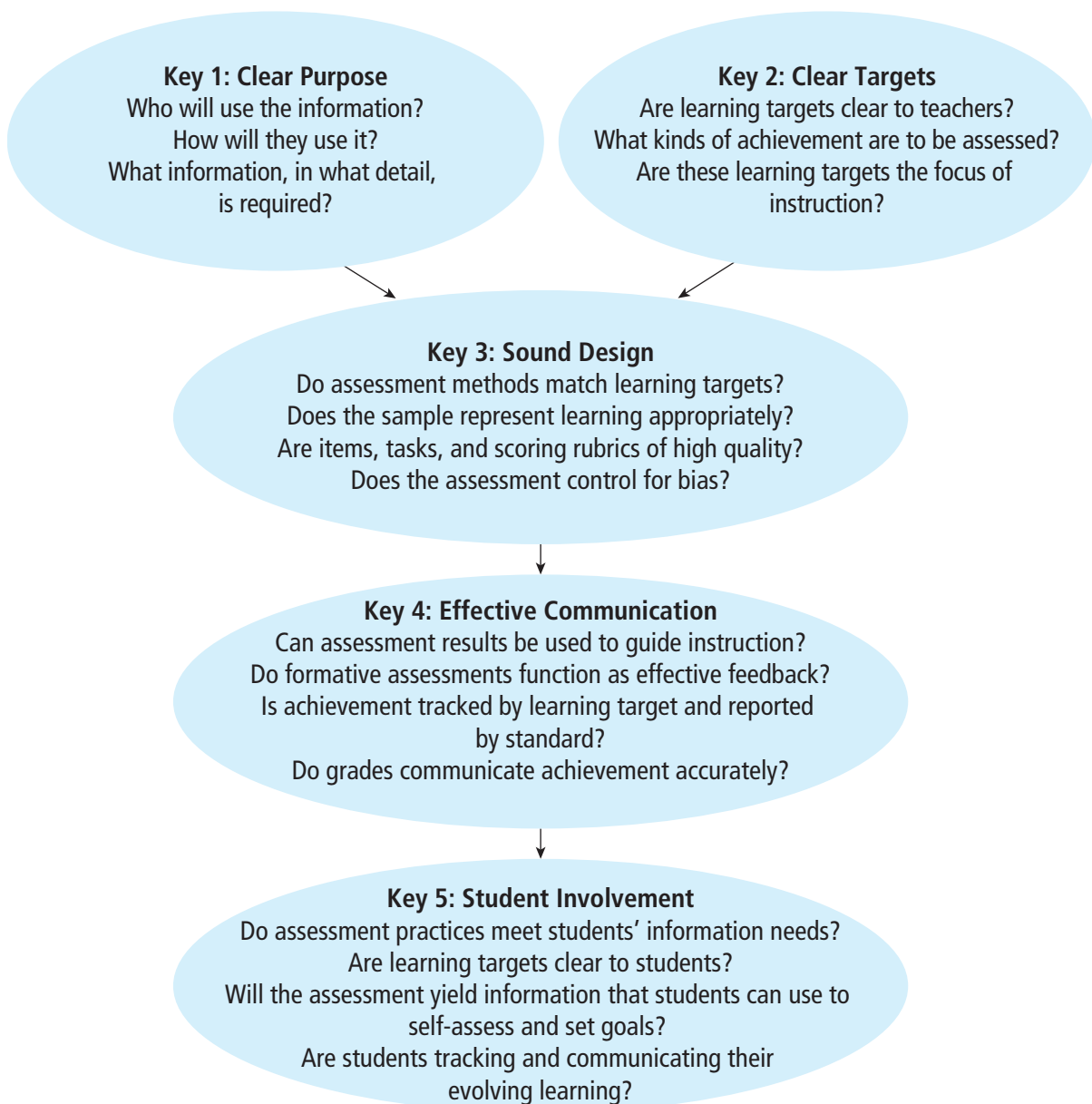
Figure 1.3 shows a graphic representation of the five keys to quality. We will use this figure as our “mall map” throughout the book to indicate which key or keys to quality each chapter addresses.

Key 1: Clear Purpose

We assess, in part, to gather information about student learning that will inform instructional decisions. Teachers and students make decisions every day that drive learning—they need regular information about what each student has and has not yet learned. We make some decisions frequently, such as when we decide what comes next in student learning within lessons or when we diagnose problems. Typically, these decisions, made day to day in the classroom based on evidence gathered from classroom activities and assessments, are intended to support student learning—to help students learn more. These are known collectively as *formative assessment* practices: formal and informal processes teachers and students use to gather evidence for the purpose of improving learning.

We make other decisions periodically, such as when we assign report card grades or identify students for special services. In this case, we rely on classroom assessment evidence accumulated over time to determine how much learning has occurred. Other instructional decisions are made less frequently, such as when school districts assess to inform the community about the efficacy of school programs or to decide whether to continue or discontinue a particular program. Often these decisions are based on results of once-a-year standardized tests reported in broad categories of

FIGURE 1.3 Keys to Quality Classroom Assessment



learning. These are all examples of *summative assessment*: assessments that provide evidence of student achievement for the purpose of making a judgment about student competence or program effectiveness.

Formative and summative assessment can be thought of as assessment *for* learning and assessment *of* learning respectively (Figure 1.4). The purpose of one is to improve achievement, to *support* learning, and the purpose of the other is to measure, to *verify*, learning.

As you can see, assessment information can serve a variety of users—such as students, teachers, administrators, parents—and uses—both formative and

FIGURE 1.4 Formative and Summative Assessment

Formative Assessment

Formal and informal processes teachers and students use to gather evidence for the purpose of improving learning

Summative Assessment

Assessment information used to provide evidence of student achievement for the purpose of making a judgment about student competence or program effectiveness

summative. In any assessment context, whether informing decisions along the way (assessment *for* learning) or measuring achievement after it has happened (assessment *of* learning), we must start by understanding the information needs of the intended users. Those needs will determine the form and frequency of assessment, as well as the level and type of detail required in the results.

Chapter 2 describes the key users of classroom assessment information and their information needs. It also explains differences between formative and summative assessment (assessment *for* and *of* learning), the reasons for engaging in assessment *for* learning, and when to use each.

Key 2: Clear Targets

Besides beginning with intended use in mind, we must also start the assessment process with a clear sense of the learning to be assessed—the achievement expectations we hold for our students, the content standards at the focus of instruction. We call these *learning targets*. When our learning targets are clear to us as teachers, the next step is to ensure they are also clear to students. We know that students' chances of success improve when they start out with a vision of where they are headed.

Chapter 3 defines kinds of learning targets, explains how to turn broad statements of content standards into classroom-level targets, and shows ways to make them clear to students.

From the Field 1.1

Jim Lloyd

They say that “what gets measured gets done.” While I believe there is some merit to this, I believe that a better way of phrasing this work is to say that “what is worthwhile, practical, and useful endures.” Assessment *for* learning passes the worthwhile, practical, and usefulness tests.

In our district, we believe that all administrators play a vital role in helping classroom assessment for student learning gain traction. If our job is to educate all students up to high standards (a national education mission that is profoundly different from where it once started), then all the educators working within that system must have a clear focus and even clearer understanding as to what things make a profound impact on the achievement of the children. Clearly classroom assessments that are accurate and communicated appropriately are critical to our mission.

Our district leadership team set two goals that we wanted to be world-class at—clear learning intentions and high-quality feedback. We’ve had the good fortune of increasing our staffs’ capacity in these areas through a partnership with Cleveland State University and have generated significant momentum, which in turn has impacted teachers’ classroom practices and student learning. We have created local, cross-grade-level learning teams and are using our own teachers as a means to further our capacity and understanding of classroom assessment.

Classroom assessment *for* student learning isn’t a simplistic instructional strategy. Rather, it is a way of being. It is a type of pedagogy that when used as a matter of practice makes a profound impact on the way the teacher engineers her learning environment and how the students work within it. We have witnessed firsthand how the learning environments in our school district have gone from great to greater as classroom assessment *for* student learning becomes more deeply embedded in our classrooms and in our students.

We believe that in order for systemic change to occur and endure it must be embraced by those it impacts most of all—teachers and students. Teachers who engage in quality classroom assessment *for* student learning as a matter of instructional practice have clearer student learning intentions, offer more regular and descriptive feedback, create more accurate assessments, communicate assessment results more effectively and involve students in the assessment process. All are ingredients for high levels of student engagement and learning. It has been our experience that Classroom Assessment *for* Student Learning impacts all learners—high, middle, and low achieving.

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Key 3: Sound Assessment Design

Assessments can accurately or inaccurately reflect the current level of student learning. Obviously, our goal always is to generate accurate information. The previous two keys, *clear purpose* and *clear targets*, lay the foundation for quality assessment by telling us what needs to be assessed and what kind of results are needed. Next comes the challenge of creating an assessment that will deliver those results. This requires an assessment method capable of reflecting the intended target. Will it be selected response, written

response, performance assessment, or personal communication? These four assessment methods are not interchangeable: each has strengths and limitations and each works well in some contexts but not in others. Our task always is to choose a proper method for the intended purpose and learning targets—the quality of our assessments hinges on it.

Chapter 4 describes the four assessment methods and provides practice in matching methods to learning targets. It also offers guidance on assessment planning with the intended purpose in mind.

After we have chosen a method, we develop it with attention to three other quality criteria. We must sample well by including just enough exercises to lead to confident conclusions about student achievement. We must build the assessment of high-quality items, tasks, or exercises accompanied by proper scoring schemes. And finally, every assessment situation brings with it its own list of things that can go wrong and that can bias the results or cause them to be inaccurate. To prevent these problems we must recognize and know how to eliminate or control for sources of bias.

Chapters 5 through 8 expand on these accuracy requirements for each individual assessment method: selected response (Chapter 5), written response (Chapter 6), performance assessment (Chapter 7), and personal communication (Chapter 8).

Key 4: Effective Communication

Once the information needs are clear, the learning targets are clear, and the information gathered is accurate, an assessment's results must be communicated to the intended user(s) in a timely and understandable way. When we do this well, we keep track of both formative and summative assessment results, and devise sharing options suited to the needs of whoever will act on the results. Communication of formative assessment information provides the kind of descriptive feedback learners need to grow. Communication in a summative assessment context leaves all recipients understanding the sufficiency of student learning such as when we convert summative assessment information into grades that accurately reflect achievement at a point in time.

Chapters 9 through 12 describe formative and summative record-keeping procedures, sound grading practices, and uses of portfolios and student-involved conferences to expand our communication options.

Key 5: Student Involvement

Student involvement is the central shift needed in our traditional view of assessment's role in teaching and learning. The decisions that contribute the most to student learning success are made, not by adults working in the system, *but by students themselves*. *Students* decide whether the learning is worth the effort required to attain it. *Students* decide whether they believe they are capable of reaching the learning targets. *Students* decide whether to keep learning or to quit working. It is only when students make these decisions in the affirmative that our instruction can benefit their learning. So an essential part of our

classroom assessment job is to keep students in touch with their progress as learners in ways that keep them believing in themselves as learners so they will keep trying.

Techniques for involving students are woven throughout the chapters. Chapter 2 describes the research on the positive impact of student involvement on motivation and achievement. Chapter 3 provides specific ways to make learning targets clear to students. Chapters 5 through 8 include method-specific suggestions for involving students in self-assessment and goal setting. Chapters 9, 11, and 12 offer techniques for involving students in keeping track of and communicating about their own learning.

From the Field 1.2

Janna Smith

I used to think of assessment as an “ending” to a learning event. When preparing to teach a unit, my planning primarily consisted of looking at the objectives and crafting activities that would engage all students. The word *assessment* was a noun that referred only to a task generally used at the end to determine a grade. The things students were asked to do as part of an endpoint assessment task may—or may not—have been aligned to the key objectives. Items on an end-of-unit test were usually selected response or short-answer/essay, but for the most part that was just for variety’s sake.

Now *assessment* is not a singular noun referring to an individual test or task, but refers to an ongoing process that is interwoven with instruction. The process no longer happens only at the end; in fact, it begins with pre-assessment. With my current group of 7th-grade mathematics students, I introduce a grid at the onset of each unit. The grid lists the learning targets for that unit, with space for students to record their analysis of the results of their pre-assessment, target by target.

Additional boxes are included for each target, where students list sources of evidence from daily work, quizzes, etc. Throughout the unit, we periodically pause for students to select which of the learning targets their evidence indicates they are doing well with and on which they need more support. I use their self-assessments along with my own records of their performance to determine mini-lessons, small-group instruction topics, and areas where we might move more quickly.

When I was first introduced to the principles of assessment *for* learning, I was a district-level administrator. My role consisted of providing professional development and supporting principals and teachers in implementing quality classroom assessment practices. I believed it could work and spoke passionately about how to integrate these strategies into instruction. I modeled lessons to demonstrate how learning targets could be turned into student-friendly language. I even taught a graduate-level course on classroom assessment in a school district, but I had never actually used assessment *for* learning in my own classroom! When I finally had that opportunity, I was determined to “walk my talk” with a group of 7th graders who have struggled with mathematics. I wanted to see my own “Inside the Black Box” (Black & Wiliam, 1998b) with my students, hoping it would result in increased achievement and motivation.

Making assessment *for* learning come to life in my own classroom has renewed my zeal for teaching. I am more focused on essential learning targets, and my students always know what we are learning, how they are doing, and what we can work on together to close any gaps. They have become fantastic self-assessors, using their “evidence files” to determine their own strengths and challenges. Most importantly, they are becoming more confident problem solvers who no longer avoid and complain about math. By going back to the classroom, I now know firsthand that using these strategies can have a significant positive impact on student learning.

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January 2011

CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT COMPETENCIES

Our mission with this book is to help improve the classroom assessment practices of all teachers wanting to do so. If we are successful, together we’ll move assessment practices in the classroom from a collection of less-effective practices to a model that is grounded in the research of how to use classroom assessment to improve student learning. Figure 1.5 illustrates key shifts in thought and practice that are hallmarks of classroom assessment competency.

The teacher competencies listed in Figure 1.6 represent the big picture of what an assessment-literate teacher knows and can do within each of the five keys to quality.

FIGURE 1.5 Classroom Assessment: From . . . to . . .

From	To
Classroom tests disconnected from the focus of instruction	Classroom tests reflecting the written and taught curriculum
Assessments using only selected response formats	Assessment methods selected intentionally to reflect specific kinds of learning targets
“Mystery” assessments, where students don’t know in advance what they are accountable for learning	Transparency in assessments, where students know in advance what they will be held accountable for learning
All assessments and assignments, including practice, “count” toward the grade	Some assessments and assignments “count” toward the grade; others are for practice or other formative use
Students as passive participants in the assessment process	Students as active users of assessments as learning experiences
Students not finding out until the graded event what they are good at and what they need to work on	Students being able to identify their strengths and areas for further study during learning

FIGURE 1.6 Classroom Assessment Competencies

1. Clear Purpose

Assessment processes and results serve clear and appropriate purposes.

- a. Identify the key users of classroom assessment information and know what their information needs are.
- b. Understand formative and summative assessment uses and know when to use each.

2. Clear Targets

Assessments reflect clear student learning targets.

- a. Know how to identify the five kinds of learning targets.
- b. Know how to turn broad statements of content standards into classroom-level learning targets.
- c. Begin instructional planning with clear learning targets.
- d. Translate learning targets into student-friendly language.

3. Sound Design

Learning targets are translated into assessments that yield accurate results.

- a. Design assessments to serve intended formative and summative purposes.
- b. Select assessment methods to match intended learning targets.
- c. Understand and apply principles of sampling learning appropriately.
- d. Write and/or select assessment items, tasks, scoring guides, and rubrics that meet standards of quality.
- e. Know and avoid sources of bias that distort results.

4. Effective Communication

Assessment results function to increase student achievement. Results are managed well, combined appropriately, and communicated effectively.

- a. Use assessment information to plan instruction.
- b. Offer effective feedback to students during the learning.
- c. Record formative and summative assessment information accurately.
- d. Combine and summarize information appropriately to accurately reflect current level of student learning.

5. Student Involvement

Students are active participants in the assessment process.

- a. Identify students as important users of assessment information.
- b. Share learning targets and standards of quality with students.
- c. Design assessments so students can self-assess and set goals on the basis of results.
- d. Involve students in tracking, reflecting on, and sharing their own learning progress.

They can be thought of as the *content standards* for this program of study. Within each of these competencies are specific understandings and actions, taught in each of the following chapters.

We understand that these classroom assessment competencies are not entirely new. Effective teachers already know a considerable amount about assessment; these practices have always been a part of good teaching. We offer our standards of good assessment practice to provide a cognitive structure for defining the domain, and to permit you to determine where you want to deepen your own assessment expertise.

Summary

Quality classroom assessment produces *accurate information* that is *used effectively* to increase student learning. This is the “do it right” and “use it well” of the book’s title.

Accurate information comes from clearly identifying the purpose(s) for which information about student learning is being gathered, clearly defining learning targets for students, using the appropriate assessment method well, selecting a sample to accurately represent achievement of the intended learning, and avoiding circumstances that might bias results.


Effective use includes relying on accurate assessment results to plan instruction

and interventions; using descriptive feedback and self-assessment tactics to help students understand their own progress; that is, their successes and areas for further study; and tracking and communicating achievement information clearly and in a way tailored to the user’s needs.

These two overarching aspects of quality, *accuracy* and *effective use*, form the focus of the succeeding chapters of this book. Through the study and application of ideas in each chapter, you will learn to select, create, and use assessments that are of high quality and that engender student success.

CHAPTER 1 ACTIVITIES

End-of-chapter activities are intended to help you master the chapter's learning targets. They are designed to deepen your understanding of the chapter content, provide discussion topics for learning team meetings, and guide implementation of the practices taught in the chapter.

Forms and materials for completing each activity appear in editable Microsoft Word format in the Chapter 1 CD file. Documents on the CD are marked with this symbol: 

Chapter 1 Learning Targets

1. Know what the five keys to classroom assessment quality are
 2. Know why they are important to assessment accuracy and effective use of assessment information
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Activity 1.1 Keep a Reflective Journal

Activity 1.2 Connect Your Own Experiences to the Keys to Quality

Activity 1.3 Complete the Assessment Practices Inventory

Activity 1.4 Survey Students

Activity 1.5 Gather Samples of Student Work

Activity 1.6 Reflect on Your Own Learning

Activity 1.7 Set up a Growth Portfolio