

Advancing Formative Assessment in Every Classroom

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2

LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD: Sharing Learning Targets and Criteria for Success



The first step in formative assessment is being clear about learning goals. Actually, the first step in any kind of assessment is being clear about what it is that you want to know about. You may have heard this expressed as “identify outcomes” or in some other terminology used in your state or district. Simply put, if assessment is looking for evidence of something, you have to know what that something is.

For an external assessor, identifying outcomes is enough. For the classroom teacher, however, being clear about learning goals requires more than just identifying outcomes. For formative assessment, teachers not only must be clear about what they want students to learn (the lesson objective or intended outcome for students who “get it”); they also must know typical student steps and missteps toward this goal (the typical learning progression). This knowledge is necessary because what the teacher is looking for in formative assessment is evidence of where students are on their journey toward mastery of the learning outcome. To interpret student work that is on the way toward mastery, teachers need to be able to recognize typical and not-so-typical progress.

What Does It Mean to Share Learning Targets and Criteria for Success?

Sharing learning targets does not mean merely writing the objective on the board or telling students what the objective is in a sentence or two. Most students will,

of course, be able to repeat back to the teacher what she said the objective was, and that can be somewhat useful. What we mean by sharing learning targets and criteria for success, however, is that students comprehend what those objectives mean. For example, a reading objective might be that students can identify the main idea in passages of a certain type and level. What we want is more than students being able to say “identify main idea.” We want students to understand that they will learn how to get a better grasp on the meaning of what they read, why that should be a goal for them, and what it feels like to do that. For the student, this means both understanding the learning goal and knowing what good work on the assignment looks like. It’s not a goal if the student can’t envision it.

The single most important method for routinely sharing learning targets is using assignments that match—*really* match—the learning goal. It is in the assignment that the teacher translates the learning goal into action for the student. The student will strive to do the assignment, not the abstract goal. When we say an assignment or activity must “embody” the learning goal, we mean that the assignment or activity is such a close match with the goal that the student would be able to think, “If I can do [this assignment], then I can do [the learning objective].”

Teachers should always share their goals for students’ learning—both by telling or writing the goals and by giving assignments and activities that embody them—and then check for students’ understanding. It is not enough to ask students, “Do you understand?” They’ll say yes, of course! Rather, teachers should use strategies that help assess students’ comprehension of the meaning of learning goals and their comprehension of what good work looks like. Teachers should use this information to affirm understanding and clarify misconceptions.

How Does Sharing Learning Targets and Criteria for Success Affect Student Learning and Achievement?

One of the sweet moments in the life of one of the authors illustrates this question’s point. Sue’s adult daughter, newly on her own, asked Sue to make her a collection of the recipes that she had come to know and love (including Sue’s apple pie and pot roast). Of course, it felt good to know that she associated these foods with home and wanted to take them with her to her own new home. But this homey story is a good metaphor for this chapter. Sue’s daughter had a very clear picture of the intended outcome, based on her experiences of that pie and that pot roast over

the years. She would compare her attempts to make these recipes with her sense of what they should taste like. Now, the pot roast was easy enough, but she had to practice several times to get the pie right. The point for this chapter is that if she did not have a concept of what “good” pie was, she would not have been able to shape her pie baking toward it, or at least not as effectively or efficiently.

Academic learning targets, although less concrete, work in a similar way. A vision of the end point makes the journey possible. So, for example, a 4th grade teacher might ask her students to write a book report. Her learning target, however, is not “write a book report.” She wants students to be able to read and comprehend the plot of a chapter book and to be able to make a personal connection with the story. Therefore, she says, “Your book report should be two paragraphs. In the first paragraph, summarize the story so that someone who has not read the book would know what happened. In the second paragraph, tell what your favorite part of the story was, and why.”

In so doing, this teacher has given clear directions. She has also made a start at sharing the learning target. All the students in her class may well understand what they are supposed to do. However, we can almost guarantee that there will be many different visions of what constitutes a good, clear summary of a book and an engaging description of one’s favorite part.

What would help students envision the target more clearly? Showing students some good examples and having them discuss why they were good examples would help. Showing students examples of various quality levels and having them use comparison and contrast to order them and explain why some are better than others would be an even stronger strategy. Using rubrics with specific descriptions could help with either of these processes and would be a good default strategy if no examples were available.

Now the students are ready to start their book reports with a clear target in mind. They may use those rubrics and examples again, during their work, to self-assess. We will have more to say about student self-assessment in Chapter 5.

What Common Misconceptions Might Teachers Hold About Sharing Learning Targets and Criteria for Success?

Teachers are likely to hold at least two common misconceptions about sharing learning targets.

Misconception #1: Informing the students of the learning target by telling them what it is or by writing it on the board is sufficient. This is probably the most common misconception teachers might hold about sharing learning targets. Years ago, in a district where one of us taught, teachers were required to write their objectives on the board, and supervisors would observe to make sure the teachers did so. The assumption behind this practice is that writing the objective on the board puts the objective inside the students' heads. This is not a good assumption. Having students be able to recall or recite the objective is necessary but not sufficient for their understanding it.

Strategic talking points school leaders can use to address this misconception include the following:

- Most "lesson objectives" are written in language for teachers.
- Discussion about what a lesson objective means can help students express the objective in their own words and clarify the concept in their own minds.
- Students will understand best what a goal really means when they can see examples of good work.

Misconception #2: Sharing a rubric with students will ensure they understand the criteria for success. Sharing a rubric with students is a good start, but as with the objective, you need to check for student understanding of what the criteria mean. Some criteria are easy to understand—for example, "use at least three sources of information"—but things you can count are not always at the heart of a learning goal. Some criteria require the students to have more abstract, but arguably more important, concepts. Using the context of writing, for example, a rubric for "voice" might say, "Conveys a sense of the person behind the words." Reading that phrase does not mean students will necessarily recognize writing that conveys a sense of the person behind the words when they see it. Some students will need to be taught how to distinguish writing that does this well and less well.

School leaders who observe teachers writing the objective on the board without any discussion or follow-up with students might want to talk with those teachers to determine if they, in fact, believe this is a sufficient method for sharing learning targets. Similarly, school leaders who observe teachers passing out rubrics and moving on with the assumption that students can use them might likewise talk with those teachers.

Strategic talking points school leaders can use to address this misconception include the following:

- Rubrics are a good starting point because they organize the criteria for students into levels of description about various aspects of the work.
- You can find out how students comprehend what the descriptive levels of a rubric mean by asking them to state them in their own words.
- Students can learn to more precisely identify levels of quality when they see them by looking at examples of work.
- Students who can identify quality levels in sample papers are better at self-assessment and at producing desired levels of work themselves.

What Is the Motivation Connection?

Students who have clear pictures of the learning target and of the criteria for success are likely to also have a sense of what they can and should do to make their work measure up to those criteria and that goal. Clear learning targets direct both teachers *and students* toward specific goals. Students can meet goals only if they are actually working toward them, and they can't work toward them until they understand what they are.

Once students understand where they are headed, they are more likely to feel that they can be successful, can actually reach the goal. Students' belief that they can be successful at a particular task or assignment is called self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Students who have self-efficacy are more likely to persist in their work and especially more likely to persist in the face of challenge (Pajares, 1996).

When students feel that they understand the criteria by which their work will be judged, they also have some sense of control over their work and are poised to be strategic self-regulators. If I, the student author, understand that a good story needs a sense of voice that engages readers and makes them feel like I am a real person communicating with them, and if I (or someone else) read my story and find it flat and wooden, then I know I have work to do—and, more important, I know *what* work I have to do. That student decision ("My story lacks a vibrant voice, and I should revise it for that reason") is an example of self-regulation.

Notice that it takes both an understanding of the learning target (what “voice” is in writing) and an understanding of the criteria for success (recognizing writing with effective use of voice when we see it) to foster self-efficacy and self-regulation. If students understand the learning target but don’t know what qualities will get them there, they are likely to feel discouraged.

What Are Specific Strategies I Can Share with Teachers?

Teachers can help students understand learning targets by the same means they use to help students understand anything: telling, showing, or discovering. “Telling” methods were popular for a while. The classic in this category is for teachers to write their lesson objectives on the board. This method is certainly better than not mentioning the learning target, which makes it a guessing game (“I wonder why we’re doing this?”). But, as noted earlier, a problem with this method is that lesson objectives are often expressed in teacher language—for example, “The student will be able to do three-digit subtraction with borrowing.” True sharing of learning targets involves getting students to comprehend what the learning target entails. As we have already said, many students, having read this objective on the board, could repeat it back but not tell you much about what it meant.

In this book, we concentrate on ways to share learning targets and criteria for success by showing this information to students or by having students discover this information for themselves. Directed student conversation can be a powerful way for students to develop comprehension of their learning target. Strategies that put information in written form enable teachers and students to review and refer to it. Both oral and written strategies are ways to get what’s inside a student’s head out into public space so that others can hear it or read it and respond. Figure 2.1 summarizes the strategies that we discuss in the following sections.

Questioning

Questioning, along with directed conversation, is one strategy for communicating learning targets. The strategy can be simple or elaborate, depending on the particular students and content. Sometimes all that is needed is that a teacher ask students what questions they have about an assignment.

FIGURE 2.1
Strategies for Sharing Learning Targets and Criteria for Success

General Strategy	Specific Tactics	Examples
Questioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers check for understanding by asking for student questions or by asking students to put learning goals in their own words. 	<p><i>Kevin, can you tell me one thing about the water cycle you already know? . . . Jacob, can you tell me one other thing about the water cycle? . . . Jaden, can you put those two things together so we have a definition of the water cycle?</i></p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers use directed discussion or warm-up questions. 	<p><i>Why is it important to know about the water cycle?</i></p> <p><i>What would a good report on the water cycle look like?</i></p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students think-pair-share what they think they will be learning, why it's important, and how it relates to previous learning. 	<p><i>Donna, what do you think of Matthew's idea about the way to do a picture of the water cycle?</i></p> <p><i>How long would the report have to be to show you really understood the whole water cycle?</i></p>
Planning and Envisioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students list what they know and want to know. 	<p><i>Groups working on water cycle reports plan a week of work, including library research, reading, writing, drawing, editing, and planning a presentation.</i></p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students make planning charts for individual or group work. 	<p><i>Students use these planning charts to keep track of progress. The teacher uses these planning charts for interim assessment of student progress and for asking questions about what students learn along the way.</i></p> <p><i>The teacher asks for interim assessments as checkpoints along the way—for example, a list of sources after library day, an outline as the report is planned, a draft as the report is written, a list of students' roles for an oral presentation.</i></p>

FIGURE 2.1
Strategies for Sharing Learning Targets and Criteria for Success (cont.)

General Strategy	Specific Tactics	Examples
Using Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students look at good examples and make a list of what makes them good. 	<p><i>Here are the five best water cycle reports from last year. What do you notice about them?</i></p> <p><i>Can you organize these things you notice into categories?</i></p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students look at a range of examples, sort them into quality levels, and write descriptions of the levels that turn into draft rubrics. 	<p><i>Put these water cycle reports into three piles: Good, OK, and Not Good.</i></p> <p><i>What makes the Good ones good? How are the OK reports different from the Good ones? From the Not Good ones?</i></p>
Using Rubrics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students use teacher-made rubrics to assess examples. 	<p><i>Here are some water cycle reports from last year. Discuss with your group how you would evaluate them using this rubric, and why.</i></p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students rephrase teacher-made rubrics into their own words. 	<p><i>Here is the rubric we will use for your water cycle reports. How would you describe these qualities to another student?</i></p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students use rubrics to assess their own work and revise. 	<p><i>How do you think your water cycle report measures up on this rubric? Use a highlighter to show the descriptions in the rubric that you think describe your work. Is there anything you want to revise?</i></p>

Listening to these questions can provide the teacher with some information about what the students think they are to do and what they are to learn.

A variation on simple questioning as a strategy to communicate the learning target is for the teacher to describe a lesson's target and an assignment or activity that embodies it and then to ask students to repeat what she said in their own words. Putting something in one's own words is a classic comprehension activity. In so doing, students will show how they are understanding what the teacher is asking them to do.

A slightly more complex version of this questioning strategy is to use a think-pair-share activity. The teacher can have pairs of students (1) explain what they think they are going to learn, in their own words, (2) explain why they think it is important, and (3) figure out at least one previous lesson topic this goal is related to. In whole-class discussion, the pairs share and discuss their answers and come to a class consensus for the three questions (*What are you going to learn? Why is it important? What previous lesson topic is this goal related to?*). The purpose of the third question is to explicitly help students see that they are building knowledge and skill and to activate relevant prior knowledge that they can then use as they work.

Sato and Atkin (2006/2007) report on a version of this activity that they call "warm-up questions." The teacher prepares warm-up questions that review the previous lesson or preview the coming lesson. As students respond, the teacher asks students to comment on their peers' ideas and clarify or extend them. This directed discussion brings students' ideas about the learning target out into the open, where they can be examined and focused until everyone is clear on what the upcoming lesson is going to be about. An important feature of this strategy is that the teacher should discuss with students what high-quality responses to these questions would sound like. Students will not immediately be good "clarifiers and extenders." This skill needs to be developed.

When teachers use questioning as a strategy for clarifying a learning target, they should ask students about their attitudes and experiences as well as their knowledge. Teachers can ask students to describe what prior school or other experiences and what attitudes and feelings come to mind, as appropriate to the topic. They can assess students' responses for relevance and then use the

information for adjusting instruction. For example, many elementary school students study recycling as a community activity or as part of a science unit. It would be useful to know which students come from homes where recycling is an important activity, what they do at home to recycle, and why their parents have told them they are doing it.

Planning and Envisioning

For some learning targets, having students envision what they know and what they will know (or do) can be a good way to give them a picture of what their learning will be about. The K and W columns ("know" and "want to know") of a KWL chart are classic examples of this strategy for clarifying learning targets.

For younger students, teachers can use actual pictures that are images for "what we will do" or "what we will need" (for example, a crystal ball might represent what they think an assignment will be about, and a tool box might represent the supplies they think they will need). Dictated or student-written words can be added to the pictures in appropriate places. Colored pictures can be used as cover sheets for folders of work, as appropriate.

For older students doing project work, planning charts for individual or group work can help clarify the learning target. Students must identify what needs to be done before they can plan how to do it. Such planning charts help more with the logistical aspects of the work than with understanding concepts, but they can be important steps along the way.

Using Examples

Giving students examples of work to review and describe helps them discover and develop conceptions of the learning target and criteria for good work by induction. If possible, teachers can use real examples from previous years from anonymous students. If no real examples from previous students are available, teachers can construct examples to illustrate the range of possible performance. If a teacher is using a rubric, it should include at least one example per level; two is better at the common levels of performance. For learning targets involving higher-order thinking, the teacher should try to have these represent levels of quality rather than quantity, so students will have to explain characteristics of the

work rather than just say things like “You wanted three sources, and this paper only has two.”

For some learning targets, a good source of anonymous examples that range in quality from excellent to poor is the National Assessment of Educational Progress released items, available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/itmrls/>. Use the Questions Tool to bring up released items and examples of student work. Be sure to select “constructed response” (that is, not multiple-choice items) so there will be student work associated with the writing prompts, math problems, or social studies and science questions.

Students can discuss the qualities of the examples and arrive at a description of what good work looks like. If the teacher gave students a rubric, students can come to consensus on where each example would fall on the rubric, and why.

If the teacher has not given students a rubric, students can sort the examples into piles, come up with a description of each pile, and thus develop their own draft rubrics. For example, students can sort examples of work into “Good,” “OK,” and “Not Good” piles and then describe the characteristics of each. Teachers can use the student-generated rubrics as is or edit them as necessary. Even 1st graders can create rubrics in this way. Research suggests young children’s first attempts at rubrics might give neatness and appearance too much weight and substance too little weight (Higgins, Harris, & Kuehn, 1994), but even this can make a teachable moment.

One of us met a teacher in Nebraska who had used the strategy of providing examples and “created a monster,” as she said with a smile. Each year, her middle school science students created a notebook about the material they were studying. She decided to save some of the good science notebooks to use as examples, with student permission, of course. She found her students were eager to have her use their work as good examples. However, by her third year of using this strategy, she found that each year the notebooks were better than the year before. Students would look at the examples, figure out what the previous students had done, and go one better. The notebooks developed to be not only longer but also more substantive, because using examples made it easy for students to envision what could be done.

Sharing only good examples helps students envision a target. Sharing a range of examples, from good to poor, allows students to develop a conceptual understanding of the criteria. In the Nebraska example, if the teacher had shown

students some mediocre and poor notebooks, too, the students would have had more opportunity to discuss the criteria. However, identifying a student's work as "not a good example" is something some teachers are reluctant to do, for the sake of the student. For a range of examples, it is best to use examples from anonymous sources or teacher-created examples.

Using Rubrics

The strategy of using examples often involves rubrics—either ones the teacher has provided or ones the students generate from the examples. Even if examples are not available, however, rubrics can help clarify learning targets in students' minds and help them understand the criteria for success. In some cases, student translations of teacher rubrics into what is sometimes called "kid-friendly" language can be helpful as well.

Teachers can also use rubrics to clarify learning targets through opportunities for revision, if appropriate. Students can review their own work against rubrics, decide what needs to be revised for improvement, and then do that before they turn in the work. Alternatively, the teacher can allow "not acceptable" papers or projects to be redone, although it is usually better for students to revise work before they turn it in for a grade. That makes them, and not the teacher, the arbiters of their revisions. Some teachers have students do peer review and revision. We advise that even if teachers incorporate peer review into their students' work time, they also allow for self-assessment. Peers can make helpful suggestions, but it is the students' own decisions about their work that lead to learning.

How Will I Recognize Effective Sharing of Learning Targets and Criteria for Success When I See It?

First, ask students. Probably the most accurate marker of classrooms where learning targets and criteria are shared effectively is that students can explain, when asked, what it is that they are supposed to do, and why.

Second, observe teachers. Look for evidence that the strategies described in the preceding sections—questioning, planning and envisioning, using examples, and using rubrics—are being not only used but used well. In particular, look for the following:

- Are students asked to put the learning targets (or lesson objectives) in their own words?
- Are students asked to talk about their ideas and previous experiences related to learning targets?
- Does the teacher listen to student visions of their work, and, more important, does the teacher use that information in some way?
- Are students encouraged to plan their work, and do they have opportunities to implement those plans?
- Do students have an opportunity to review and respond to examples of work?
- Does the teacher use rubrics formatively—that is, to shape work, not just to grade it?

Learning to recognize the ways that teachers and students share learning targets requires systematic observation based on a clear understanding of the many effective ways this sharing can happen. Such observation can also help you uncover areas for professional growth that can guide your conversations with teachers about the critical importance of sharing learning targets and the criteria for success. The exercise presented here—a shared learning targets case study—is a three-tiered process for gathering sound evidence through a classroom walk-through (see Figure 2.2), a lesson plan/assignment walk-through (see Figure 2.3), and a student outcome walk-through (see Figure 2.4), followed by documentation of conclusions and determination of goals and strategies (see Figure 2.5). The exercise will help you document the ways teachers are clearly communicating the learning target and criteria for success and how students are using that information to learn how to learn—to become confident and competent self-regulated learners. Although the case study format is designed to assist a classroom walk-through, you can also use it to guide a more comprehensive formal classroom observation.

How Can I Model Effective Sharing of Learning Targets and Criteria for Success in Conversations with Teachers About Their Own Professional Learning?

Teachers should have the same clarity about your goals for them as you expect them to have about their goals for students. Often teachers are given professional

FIGURE 2.2

Tier 1: Classroom Walk-Through for Sharing Learning Targets

Document the ways the teacher communicates learning targets and the criteria for success/elements of quality with students. You can use notes to expand on your observations.			
The teacher used the following communication modes to share the learning targets and criteria for success/elements of quality:			
<input type="checkbox"/> Oral	<input type="checkbox"/> Written	<input type="checkbox"/> Displays	<input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrations/ modeling
The teacher used the following formats to share the learning targets and the criteria for success:			
<input type="checkbox"/> Rubric	<input type="checkbox"/> Contract	<input type="checkbox"/> Checklist of expectations and requirements	<input type="checkbox"/> Anchor papers, models, or other exemplars of quality
When did the teacher communicate the learning targets and the criteria for success?			
<input type="checkbox"/> Before instruction	<input type="checkbox"/> During instruction/ongoing	<input type="checkbox"/> At the conclusion of instruction	
How did the teacher help the students to understand the learning targets and the criteria for success/ elements of quality?			
<input type="checkbox"/> Conducted discussion and review	<input type="checkbox"/> Discussed criteria, rubrics, checklists	<input type="checkbox"/> Showed student work, mod- eled responses, examined ex- emplars or anchors of quality	
<input type="checkbox"/> Helped students apply the criteria to their own work or to a model	<input type="checkbox"/> Involved students in generating criteria/elements of quality	<input type="checkbox"/> Provided feedback to students that focused on the learning target and the criteria for success	
In what ways did the teacher engage the students in applying the criteria for success/elements of quality?			
<input type="checkbox"/> Helped students compare their work to anchors or exemplars	<input type="checkbox"/> Helped students identify anchors or models based on the criteria	<input type="checkbox"/> Used rubrics, check- lists, or other tools to assist in assess- ments of quality	<input type="checkbox"/> Helped students develop criteria for success/elements of quality
In what ways did the teacher engage the students in developing/identifying criteria for success and/or elements of quality?			
<input type="checkbox"/> Brainstormed/discussed criteria	<input type="checkbox"/> Discussed elements of quality directly related to the learning target and performance task/product requirements	<input type="checkbox"/> Discussed elements of a quality answer, paper, response, A work	

FIGURE 2.3

Tier 2: Classroom Walk-Through for Lesson Plans and Learning Activities on Sharing Learning Targets

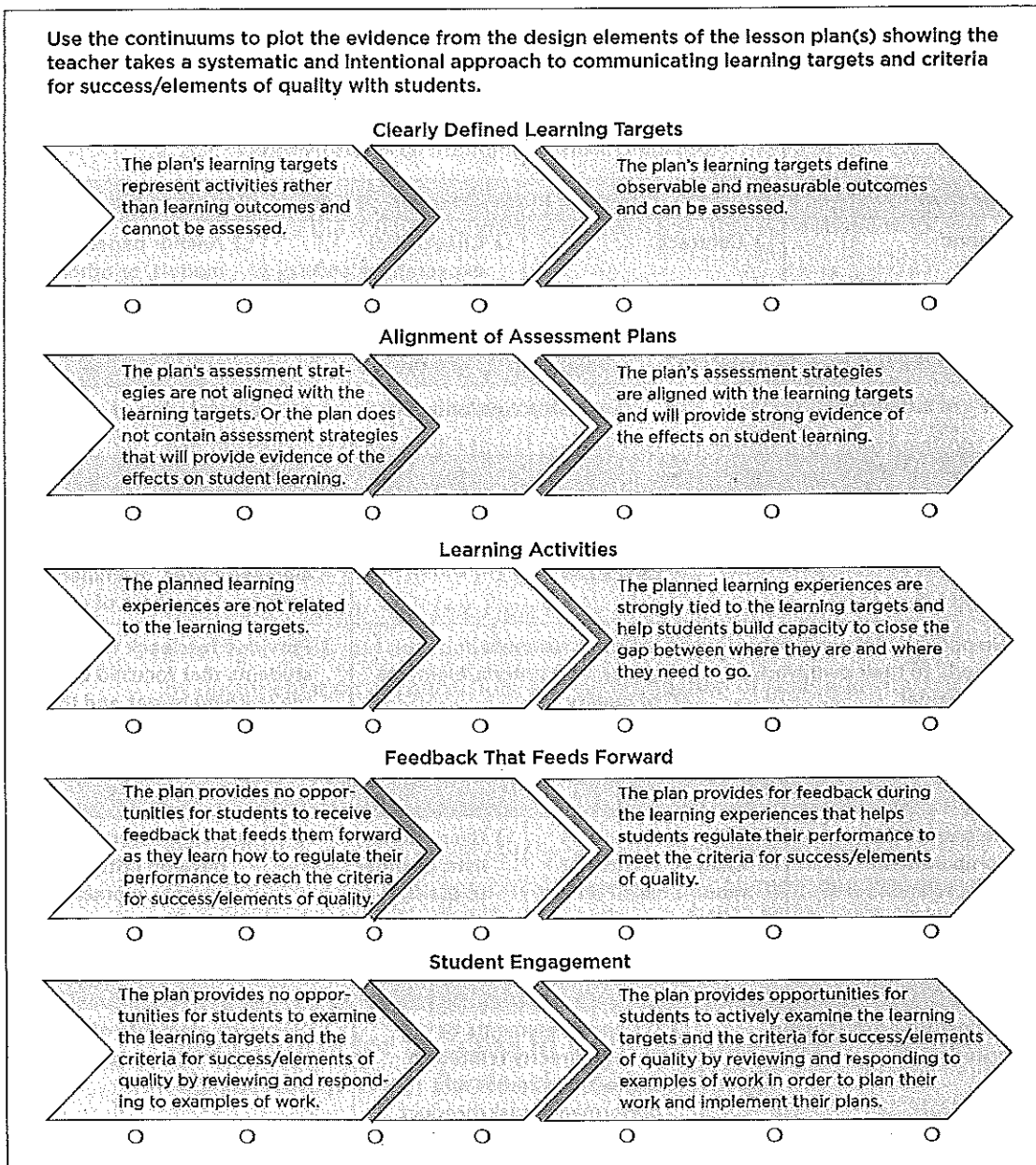


FIGURE 2.4

Tier 3: Classroom Walk-Through for Student Outcomes on Sharing Learning Targets

Document the student outcomes that provide strong evidence that the teacher communicates the learning targets and the criteria for success/elements of quality with students.

Ask three students the following question: *What are you learning in this lesson?* Then check all that apply:

- ☐ Students describe what they are doing rather than what they are learning.
Examples: *We are writing papers. We are working problems. We are finishing our projects.*
- ☐ Students describe what they are learning in general terms.
Examples: *We are learning about weather. We are learning math. We are learning about dogs.*
- ☐ Students provide a clear and accurate description of what they are learning.
Examples: *We are learning to write a topic sentence. We are learning the functions of the circulatory system.*

Ask three students the following questions: *Are you doing well (or doing a good job) on this task? How do you know?* Then check all that apply:

- ☐ Students cannot describe the criteria for success/elements of quality.
Examples: *I don't know. I will know when I see my grade. I will ask the teacher for help.*
- ☐ Students describe a general strategy for assessing the quality of their work.
Examples: *I will do a good job if I follow directions; answer all the questions; do my best.*
- ☐ Students describe specific strategies for assessing the quality of their work.
Examples: *I use the steps in the chart. I refer to the rubric. I look at the examples of good work. I use the checklist. I try to make mine like the model the teacher gave us.*

Examine student products connected to the lesson. Then check all that apply:

- ☐ The lesson will not result in student products that can be assessed for learning progress toward the learning target.
- ☐ The students will produce work that has minimal to no connection to the learning targets.
- ☐ The students will produce work that provides strong evidence of their progress toward the learning target.
- ☐ Students will have the opportunity to incorporate feedback or use tools (rubrics, checklists, etc.) to refine and revise their work in order to meet the criteria for success/elements of quality connected to the learning target.

Examine the homework assignment connected to the lesson. Then check all that apply:

- ☐ Homework assignments are strongly connected to the learning targets.
- ☐ Homework assignments are paired with a way for students to judge the quality of their work.
- ☐ Homework assignments will help students close the gap between where they are in relation to the learning target.

Ask the teacher the following question: *In this lesson, how do you share the learning targets and criteria for success/elements of quality with your students?* Record the response.

FIGURE 2.5

Conclusions and Goal Setting for Learning Targets Case Study

1. Based on the evidence you gathered through the three-tiered Learning Targets Walk-Through, what are your conclusions regarding the quality, consistency, and effect of the ways the teacher shares the learning targets and success criteria in order to inform student learning and increase student achievement?

2. Based on your conclusions above, what are three specific goals that you have for this teacher?

Goal 1:

Goal 2:

Goal 3:

3. Given the professional goals above, state three specific strategies you can share to help the teacher become more effective at sharing learning targets and the criteria for success.

Strategy 1:

Strategy 2:

Strategy 3:

development expectations without a clear idea of what it is they should “develop.” We also know that professional learning goals for teachers can be more or less thoughtful. One of us once did some work in a high school that required teachers to submit professional development goals and plans at the beginning of the year. One teacher wrote “be more professional” as his goal, and as evidence, he was going to count the number of days he wore a tie to school. Sadly, this really happened.

The first tip for learning targets for teacher professional development is to base them on individual teachers’ needs—or better, to arrive at mutually agreed-upon

professional development goals based on your observations, the teacher's reflections, and joint conversation about the goals. If a goal is partly the result of teacher self-assessment, all those motivational benefits about feelings of control and being the agent of one's own destiny will kick in.

Communicate with the teacher not only what you think the professional development goal should be but also what evidence makes that an important goal. One of the questioning strategies we described earlier is a good one to use. Simply asking the teacher to describe what it is she wants to improve, in her own words, and what she plans to do about it will go a long way in most cases to making sure that the teacher understands the goal and that the teacher knows you know she understands the goal.

Following right along, let the teacher know what you will interpret as evidence that the goal has been met and what criteria you will use. It would be even better if the evidence and criteria could be arrived at jointly, in conversation. Remember that conversation is a means by which the thinking in one person's head can be brought to light so that others can reflect and comment. Conversation in this sense is a real give and take, not a grilling or a lecture. Conversation is also the means by which people indicate their understanding of whatever they are talking about. So talking about evidence and criteria with the teacher may actually serve as a means to clarify ideas for both you and the teacher.

What If?

Communicating learning targets involves teachers and students. Teachers must have a clear conception of the target, send clear messages about it, and provide clear opportunities for students to develop the concept. Like teachers, students have to be able to understand and work with the concept behind the learning target. *What if you ask a student to explain the learning target he is working toward and the student can't come up with an answer?*

First, gather additional evidence. Is it one student who cannot express a clear concept of the learning target, or are many students in the same boat? Does the teacher know that this student doesn't understand, or does she assume he does? In short, try to determine if the issue is that the teacher needs to take a differentiated approach with one or a few students, or if the lack of understanding represents

something more wide-ranging. If it's one or a few students, talk with the teacher about strategies for individualizing learning.

If many students cannot say what the learning target is, gather some additional evidence and do some triangulation. Look at three different sources. What do the teacher's lesson plans say the learning target is? When asked, what does the teacher say it is? What do the lesson activities and assignments imply that it is? If these three do not agree, there's the problem: there is no clear learning target. Start there with the teacher, focusing on how to develop good learning targets (Gronlund & Brookhart, 2009). Talk with the teacher about the importance of coherence in planning, instruction, and assessment. Sometimes that is all it takes. For example, a teacher may have grabbed a worksheet that looked like a match—maybe it was about the same topic, for example, butterflies—without analyzing the work required to make sure it dealt with the same specific concepts or required the same thinking skills. Sometimes teachers need practice at analyzing what really is required of students in an activity or assignment, and you can work on that.

And finally, sometimes the three sources of information do agree, but they describe activities, not learning targets. For example, the teacher may say, "We're doing posters about Canada," without having a clear sense beyond that. Of course, then the students would probably have said, "We're making posters," instead of being able to state the learning goal. Is the goal to learn facts about Canada? To understand the relationship between the United States and Canada? To understand interdependencies among two countries in North America? Something else? In that case, explore with the teacher how activities and assignments should be instances that embody the learning target, selected from a group of possible activities and assignments in service of the same knowledge or skill. In our experience, you will run into this issue a lot. Many teachers use activities as a shorthand for learning goals, which unfortunately will have the effect of limiting learning.

Reflecting on Sharing Learning Targets and Criteria for Success

There is no more foundational activity for a school leader than making sure that there are clear learning targets aligned to whatever standards are in place in the

school or district, that teachers understand them and teach to them, and that students understand them and reach for them. Reflect on these questions for your school or district:

- Are there classrooms where students understand their goals particularly well? Conversely, are there classrooms where activities just seem to happen to get “done”? What are the differences in how students work and how they behave in those two types of classrooms?
- Do some teachers struggle with the concept of a “learning goal”? With the idea of an activity or assignment tapping into that learning goal in a deep way? For those teachers, what is the level of their own content knowledge and of their knowledge of typical student learning progressions for that topic?
- Do you observe a range of student behavior in the classrooms in your school? Is there any relationship between the number and type of behavior problems in a class and the clarity of student understanding and teacher communication of learning goals?

Summing It Up

In this chapter, we have talked about the foundation of formative (and summative, too, for that matter) assessment—clear communication of learning targets and clear understanding of the criteria for success. In fact, it is this characteristic—that they are both based on the same learning goals—that relates formative and summative assessment in education. We have discussed strategies teachers might use to share learning targets and criteria with their students. After that point in most lesson sequences, the students get busy and do some work. In Chapter 3, then, we turn to ways to give feedback to students on that work so that their learning can continue to progress.

