

Chapter 6

Don't Assess a Fish by Its Ability to Climb a Tree: Considerations and Strategies to Ensure Equitable Formative Assessment Practices for All Learners

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ABSTRACT

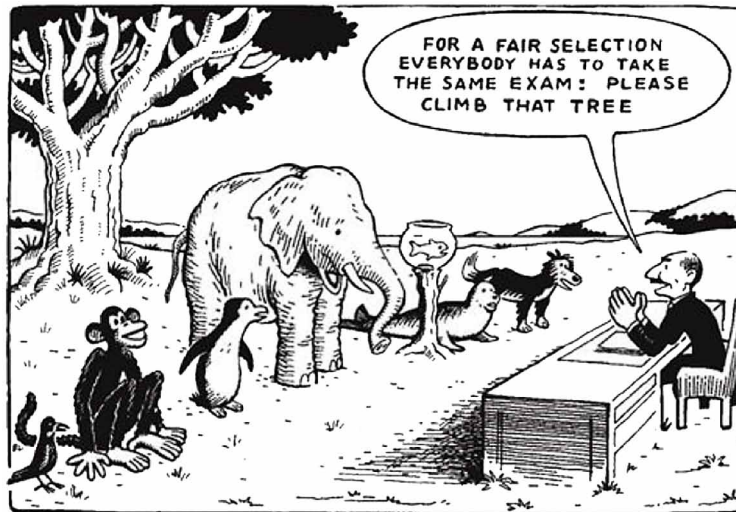
The heterogeneity of students in today's classrooms present many obstacles when it comes to formatively assessing learning. The formative assessment cycle affords teachers numerous opportunities to measure student progress towards objectives, provide timely feedback, and make necessary adjustments to instruction. Formative assessments also provide considerable value to students, in the form of learning engagement, and tracking their own progress and planning of future steps. Due to the value of formative assessments in making decisions and supporting students, it is necessary that educators plan and utilize equitable assessment practices to eliminate unnecessary barriers students may face. The chapter will therefore discuss the obstacles that variable learners may experience that impede their inclusion in classrooms, the importance of the universal design for learning in ensuring engagement and multiple means of action and expression, and finally, bring awareness to students with disabilities and the importance of accommodations and modifications in their success.

INTRODUCTION

Aiming to depict the education system, the cartoon found in Figure 1 includes a variety of animals, including a monkey, penguin, elephant, fish, seal, and tiger. The assessment proctor seated before these animals states, "For a fair selection everybody has to take the same exam: please climb that tree." Though the cartoon is laughable, there is a powerful message that underscores how assessments can be narrow

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Figure 1. Cartoon depicting how assessments may be limiting for students.



and biased for countless students. Oftentimes under this cartoon is a poignant quote by Albert Einstein, which states, “Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.”

As demonstrated in the cartoon and as discussed in greater detail throughout this chapter, our classrooms are immensely diverse. The ever-rising heterogeneity in today’s classrooms is a challenge for both veteran and novice educators. Classrooms are multifaceted and these dimensions of diversity include race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, culture, religion, mental and physical ability, class, immigration status, and academic and emotional needs. The different learning profiles leads to a complex classroom of students with different learning preferences, areas of interest and strength, and areas of challenge, which may be an obstacle for educators as they plan, teach, and continually formatively assess.

In order to ensure students with all abilities are effectively included within our classrooms, teachers must have the knowledge to meet the specific needs of their students. Both in-service and pre-service teachers may be receiving variable university coursework as it relates to inclusive practices and special education, and have different resources, and collaborative supports (Zagona, Kurth, & MacFarland, 2017). Therefore, the overarching mission of the chapter is to ensure that educators, as well as administrators and professors reflect upon and endeavor to eliminate the barriers that different learners face when it comes to formative assessments and demonstrating their academic progress. In doing so, educators may strive to engage students in the formative assessment cycle and together proactively identify formative assessments that provide greater access and equity in the classroom environment. Through this chapter, readers will add to their knowledge base as it relates to formative assessment considerations and strategies. The chapter also aims to further develop both self-efficacy and child-efficacy as educators are encouraged to continually evolve and seek out new strategies in their journey as inclusive, equitable educators.

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