CHAPTER

8

Personal Communication
as Assessment

["W"] ho remembers what a noun is?" "How would you describe the workings of a food web to someone who had never heard of one?" "What patterns do you notice in this sequence of numbers?" "What are the defining characteristics of a free-market economy?" We use personal communication as a form of assessment constantly in the classroom. Most often it serves as assessment *for* learning—to introduce a topic or to probe students' depth of understanding, for example—but with careful attention to specific rules of evidence, we can get valuable information in service of assessment *of* learning, as well. To promote accurate and effective use of personal communication, in this chapter we address the following topics:[1]

- When to use personal communication assessment.

- The types of personal communication assessment—instructional questions and answers, class discussions, conferences and interviews, oral exams, conversations with others about students, and student journals.

- How to avoid possible sources of bias that can distort results.

- How to use personal communication as assessment *for* learning.

Chapter 8 focuses on the shaded portions of Figures 8.1 and 8.2.

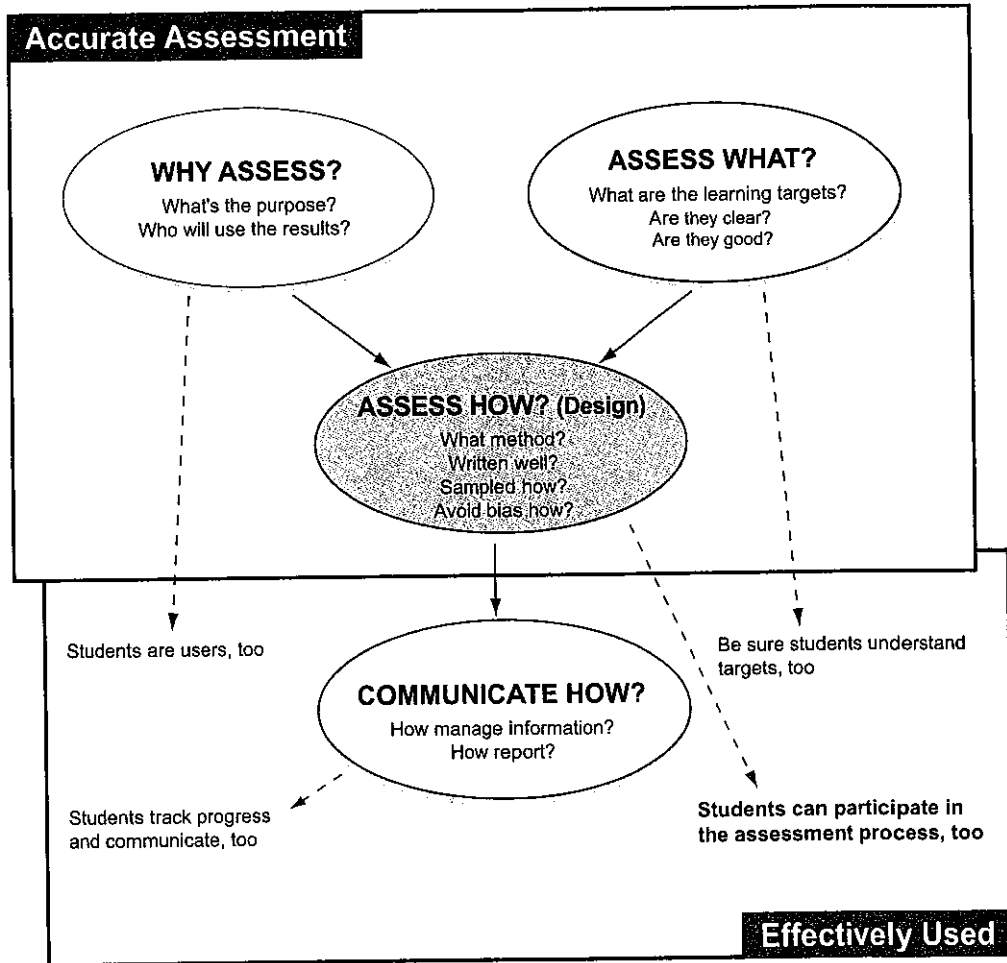**Figure 8.1   Keys to Quality Classroom Assessment**

Figure 8.2   A Plan for Matching Assessment Methods with Achievement Targets

Target to Be Assessed	Assessment Method			
	Selected Response	**Extended Written Response**	**Performance Assessment**	**Personal Communication**
Knowledge Mastery				
Reasoning Proficiency				
Performance Skills				
Ability to Create Products				

Source: Adapted from *Student-Involved Assessment* for *Learning*, 4th ed. (p. 178), by R. J. Stiggins, 2005, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall. Copyright © 2005 by Pearson Education, Inc. Adapted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc.

This chapter does not follow the same format as the three previous chapters on assessment methods, where we systematically went through five stages of assessment planning and development—planning, developing, critiquing, administering, and revising. Personal communication tends to be more informal. Therefore, our focus is more on what to keep in mind to make results from this assessment method as informative as possible.

When to Use Personal Communication Assessment

There are several conditions to keep in mind when deciding whether personal communication will yield accurate and useful information.

Matching Method to Target

The first consideration for using personal communication assessment is the type of learning target to be assessed, as described in the target–method match section of Chapter 4. Personal communication assessment is good for assessing knowledge, reasoning, and those skill targets requiring oral communication, such as speaking a foreign language, participating in group discussion, and giving oral presentations.

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Activity 8.1   Learning Targets Best Assessed with Personal Communication

To begin applying the content of this chapter to your own context, please find five or so knowledge, reasoning, and/or oral language skills targets in the curriculum materials or standards documents you use. Label each as knowledge, reasoning, and/or oral language skills and save them for later use.

Other Contextual Conditions

Several other considerations influence the choice of personal communication assessment:

- The teacher and the student must share a common language. We don't just mean a shared vocabulary and grammar, although these obviously are critical to sound assessment. We also mean a common sense of the manner in which a culture shares meaning through verbal and nonverbal cues.

- Shy or withdrawn students may not perform well in this kind of assessment context, regardless of their real achievement. To make this method work, two people must connect in an open, communicative manner. For some students, this simply is too risky, often for reasons beyond the teacher's control. There also is the danger that students with very outgoing, confident personalities will try to lay down a "smoke screen" to misrepresent their real achievement.

- Personal communication works best as assessment when students feel they are in a safe learning environment. We create safe learning environments when we make

it clear to our students that it is okay to grow at different rates. We promote safety when we permit students to succeed or fail in private, without an embarrassing public spotlight. Establishing safety for students requires establishing a humane peer environment sensitive to the plight of those who perform less well and supportive of their attempts to grow. In addition, we help students feel safe enough to risk learning when they have the opportunity to improve and perform again later to demonstrate their higher level of success.

- Personal communication works best as assessment when students understand that sometimes as their teachers we need an honest answer, not their attempt at a best possible answer or the answer they think will please us. Students must know that if they give us what they deem to be the socially desirable response to a question, a response that misrepresents the truth about their achievement or feelings, then we will be less able to help them.

- Because there are sometimes no tangible results, such as a grade or a score, from assessments conducted via personal communication, records of achievement must be managed carefully. When the information is to be used only over a span of a few moments or hours on narrow targets for a few students, extended record keeping is unnecessary. When the context includes many students, complex targets, and a requirement of later use, we must absolutely keep track of results. This process is helped by high-quality rubrics for the reasoning or skills being observed or discussed.

- Use personal communication assessment only when it is certain to generate enough information to make an adequate inference about student performance. This is a sampling issue. If a teacher wants to determine if students have understood the geometry concept just taught he might ask a few oral questions. If he only calls on students who raise their hands, he may not obtain a representative sample from which to make an accurate generalization about the whole class's level of understanding.

Sampling problems can also arise when a teacher asks the wrong questions. For example, if a teacher intends to determine how well students can problem solve using a geometry concept, she will not be able to make a sound inference if questions require recall only.

Types of Personal Communication Assessment

As with the other assessment methods, personal communication includes a variety of assessment formats: questioning, conferences and interviews, class discussions, oral examinations, and journals and logs. Some of these formats are face-to-face communication, while some are written communication. We group them all into the category of personal communication because their central intent is to create a dialogue between student and teacher.

Instructional Questions and Answers

You are no doubt intimately acquainted with this format. As instruction proceeds, we pose questions for students to answer, or we ask students to question each other. We use this practice to encourage thinking and deepen learning, and also to provide information about the learning. We listen to answers, interpret them (either by means of internally held standards or a written rubric), infer the student's level of attainment or misconceptions, and act accordingly. In this section we first discuss questioning used to assess students' level of understanding or misconceptions. We then look at questioning strategies that encourage thinking and deepen learning.

Assessing Level of Understanding

The following are keys to successful use of oral questioning as an assessment device:

- Plan key questions in advance of instruction to ensure proper alignment with the target and with students' capabilities.

- Ask clear, brief questions that help students focus on a relatively narrow range of acceptable responses.

- Probe various kinds of reasoning, as appropriate. Figure 8.3 shows question stems and key words that elicit various types of reasoning.

- Ask the question first and then call on someone to respond. This keeps all students on their toes.

- Call on both volunteers and nonvolunteers. This, too, keeps all students in the game.

- After posing a question, wait five seconds for a response. Giving students time to think before answering increases desirable outcomes—the number and length of responses, the quality of responses, student confidence, and student and teacher attitudes and expectations (Rowe, 1972; 1987).

Questioning Strategies That Promote Reasoning

When we use personal communication in this manner, we are engaging in assessment *for* learning; we are using the assessment itself to teach and deepen reasoning proficiencies. We present some suggestions here. For more detail see Clarke (2001), Hunkins (1995), Knight (2000), National Literacy Strategy (1998), and Rowe (1972, 1987).

- Use questions that go beyond recall. Label the type of reasoning that you are looking for—comparing, analyzing, evaluating, and so forth—and include the specific reasoning verb in the question.

- Ask a question in different ways to maximize student understanding of what is being asked.

- Use questions to summarize or emphasize key points for learning.

- Wait at least five seconds after asking a question before selecting a student to respond.

- Ask students to discuss their thinking in pairs or small groups. A reporter speaks on behalf of the group.

- Ask all students to write down an answer, then collect responses and read out a selection.

- Give students a choice among different possible answers and ask them all to vote on the options.

- Ask students to paraphrase each other's questions and responses.

- Invite students to elaborate. For example, "Say a little more about . . ." This encourages students to develop more complex contributions. Pursue a line of questioning with individuals to understand their thinking.

- Echo what students say. For example, "So you think that . . ." This helps students clarify their own thinking, and communicates that you value their response.

- Ask clarifying questions. For example, "What do you mean by that?" This sets the expectation that vague answers are unacceptable, and encourages thoughtful, precise answers.

- Let students observe and comment on responses; don't do all the responding yourself.

- Model the response patterns that you'd like to see from students. For example:

  1. Speculate on a given topic. This encourages students to explore ideas and understand that uncertainty is a normal stage in the thinking process.

  2. Reflect on topics. For example, "Yes, I sometimes think that . . ." This encourages students to explore the topic rather than seeking a single answer.

  3. Don't be afraid to say that you don't know the answer to a question. Follow "I don't know the answer" with "How could we find an answer?"

Assessment for Learning with Questioning Strategies

Just as with written selected response, short answer, and extended response assessments, oral questions need not always flow from teacher to student. Students can be taught various question stems that elicit different patterns of reasoning for whatever content they are studying. Students can learn to use question stems, such as those in Figure 8.3. They can also learn to provide descriptive feedback to peers or to self-assess using the rubrics you will be using to evaluate their performances, as described in Chapters 2 and 7.

Figure 8.3   Question Stems and Verbs That Elicit Different Types of Reasoning

Words that elicit recall of information:

Explain, understand, describe, identify, tell, name, list, give examples, define, label, match, choose, recall, recognize, select

Question stems that elicit various patterns of reasoning:

Analyze:
- What are the important components, parts, or ingredients of _____?
- What is the order in which _____happened? What are the steps?
- What is the main idea of what you read or saw? What are the details that support this main idea?
- What familiar pattern do you notice? (Examples include familiar story structure and numerical sequence.)
- What is this question asking?
- What information do you need to solve this problem or approach this task?

Figure 8.3   (Continued)

Compare/contrast:
- Discriminate (or distinguish) between _____ and _____.
- How are _____ and _____ alike and/or different?
- Think of an analogy for _____.
- Can you think of something else that is similar? (For example, what other stories have similar openings, characters, plots, or themes?)

Synthesize:
- What do you conclude from _____ and _____?
- How would you combine, blend, or organize _____ and _____?
- How might you adapt or modify _____ to fit _____?
- How would you describe _____ to someone else?
- How might you formulate a response or answer to _____?

Classify:
- Find an example of _____.
- What is _____ an example of?
- How might you sort_____ into groups or categories?

Infer/deduce:
- Predict what will happen next.
- Why did the author do _____?
- What are the implications of _____?
- What can you conclude from the evidence or pieces of information? (For example, "What does that tell us about numbers that end in five or zero?")

Evaluate:
- Take a position on _____ and justify, support, defend, or prove your position.
- What is your opinion on _____? What evidence do you have to support your opinion?
- Appraise, critique, judge, or evaluate _____. Support your appraisal, critique, judgment, or evaluation with evidence.
- Dispute or judge this position. Is it defendable or not? Why or why not?
- Is this _____ successful? What evidence do you have to support your opinion?
- Could _____ be better? Why or why not?
- Which is better? Why?

Activity 8.2 Generate Oral Questions

Refer to the list of learning targets that you created in Activity 8.1. Choose one and list several questions you could ask to determine students' preexisting knowledge of the topic, and/or generate different levels of reasoning about the topic. If you are working with a learning team, share your questions and refine them. Try them out and report your observations and conclusions.

Activity 8.3 Practice Questioning Strategies

In this chapter, we have suggested various questioning strategies—use of wait time, ways to encourage all students to respond to questions, and modeling the types of responses we want from students. Individually, or with your learning team, make a checklist of one or more of these strategies you want to practice in the classroom. Videotape or watch each other during a questioning session. Analyze the videotapes for instances when the targeted questioning strategies were used well and when an opportunity for a questioning strategy was missed.

This activity can be expanded to include students as questioners and as observers and evaluators of questioning strategies.

Conferences and Interviews

Some student-teacher conferences serve as structured or unstructured audits of student achievement in which the objective is to talk about what students have learned and have yet to learn. We converse with students about their levels of achievement; levels of comfort with the material they are to master; specific needs, interests, and desires; or any other achievement-related topics that contribute to an effective teaching and learning environment.

It is helpful to remember that interviews or conferences need not be conceived as every-pupil, standardized affairs, with each event a carbon copy of the others. We might meet with only one student or vary the focus of the conference with students who have different needs. The following are keys to successful use of conference and interview assessment formats:

- Carefully think out and plan questions in advance. Remember, students can share in their preparation.

- Focus on particular learning targets.

- Plan for enough uninterrupted time to conduct the entire interview or conference.

- Be sure to conclude each meeting with a summary of the lessons learned and their implications for how you and the student will work together in the future. Let the student summarize, if appropriate.

One important strength of the interview or conference as a mode of assessment lies in the impact it can have on our relationships with students. When conducted in a context where we have been up front about expectations, students understand the achievement target, and all involved are invested in student success, conferences have the effect of empowering students to take responsibility for at least part of the assessment of their own progress. As an example of how this can work, remember the description of the three-minute conference in Chapter 7. We offer more information about options for structuring student-teacher conferences in Chapter 12.

Class Discussions

When students participate in class discussions, their contributions can reveal a great deal about their levels of understanding and their achievements. Class discussions have the simultaneous effect of enhancing both student learning and their ability to use what they know.

To take advantage of the strengths of this method of assessment while minimizing the impact of potential weaknesses, think about the following:

- Prepare questions or discussion issues in advance to focus on the intended achievement target.

- Be sure students are aware of your focus in evaluating their contributions. Are you judging the content of students' contributions or the form of their contribution—how they communicate? Be clear about what it means to be good at each. Consider using a rubric to help establish clarity. An example, "Group Discussion Rubric," appears on the CD in the file, "Rubric Sampler."

- Keep in mind that the public display of achievement or lack thereof is risky for some students. Provide those students with other, more private means of demonstrating achievement.

- In contexts where achievement information derived from participation in discussion is used to influence high-stakes decisions—assessments *of* learning—keep dependable records of performance. Rely on more than your memory of their contributions. Again, a rubric can be helpful.

As an example of how this can play out in a classroom context, consider this group discussion task set before a group of 10 high school students to assess their analytical and comparison reasoning abilities, understanding of complex ideas, and ability to engage in a discussion with peers. Students prepared by reading *Good and Evil Reconsidered*, by Friedrich Nietzsche, and "The Greatest Man in the World," by James Thurber. The task consisted of engaging in a discussion about the following question: "How does the classification of men described by Nietzsche compare to Thurber's main character?" Two teachers served as raters using the rubric, "Group Discussion Rubric," with three traits: *Content Understanding*, *Reasoning* (in this case analysis and comparison), and *Interaction with Others*. At the end the two raters compared their ratings. Additionally, in case any students were too shy to jump into the middle of the discussion, students wrote up their analyses.

To view a class discussion and hear the teacher explain what she does, please watch the accompanying DVD segment, "Personal Communication."

Student Involvement in Assessing Group Discussions

Assessing student ability to engage in productive group discussions requires a rubric. If group discussion skill is an important learning outcome in your classroom, you can teach students to self-assess with the rubric (using the strategies introduced in Chapter 2 and expanded on in Chapter 7), as described in the following activity.

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Activity 8.4   Scored Discussion

Part 1: Refine the rubric for group discussion.

1. Individually or with your team review the "Student-Friendly Guide to Group Discussions" rubric on the CD in the file, "Rubric Sampler." Determine if there is anything you feel is missing from the rubric. Add it. (Especially attend to state content standards in communication. Make sure the rubric aligns.) If the wording in the rubric is not clear enough for your students, revise it. (Note that, as written, the rubric includes both interaction skills and understanding/reasoning surrounding the topic being discussed.)

2. Videotape students during a group discussion.

3. Practice analyzing the group discussion proficiency of individual students using the rubric. Do this either individually or with your learning team. Discuss possible sources of bias and distortion that might interfere with obtaining an adequate picture of individual students' group discussion proficiency. Discuss how to minimize these problems.

4. Refine the rubric and assessment procedures.

Part 2: Use the rubric to help students understand what it looks like when they are performing well in a group discussion.

1. Ask students what it looks like when people are working well together in a group discussion. What would people be doing? What would they not be doing?

2. (Optional.) Show a video of students having a group discussion. Ask students if there is anything else they would like to add to their list of features of a quality group discussion. (Note: Be sure to obtain the written permission of all students being videotaped. Also, we recommend that those on the videotape be anonymous—i.e., unknown—to those critiquing it.)

3. Ask students to compare their brainstormed list to the group discussion rubric. At what points do their list and the rubric overlap? Where do they not overlap?

4. Have students use the rubric to practice scoring anonymous individual students on a videotape, for one trait at a time. Be sure to have students justify their scores using wording from the rubric. Keep going until students get pretty good at evaluating performance.

Activity 8.4 (Continued)

5. Ask students to work in pairs to give advice to individual students on the videotape regarding how to improve their performance.

6. Provide students with descriptive feedback regarding their own performances based on the rubric for group discussions. Then ask them to self-assess their next performance using the rubric.

Share what you are trying in the classroom and your observations with your learning team. Consider reflecting on questions such as these:

- Could students score the discussions successfully? If not, why not? What will they need to learn to do so?

- Did students generate the same list of features of quality as the teachers? What were the discrepancies? What can you conclude from this?

- Was this engaging for students? Why or why not? What might you do differently to increase engagement?

- What would you need to do before using this task and rubric as an assessment *of* learning to ensure that results for individual students are accurate?

Oral Examinations

In this case, we plan and pose questions for students, who reflect and provide oral responses. We listen to and interpret the responses, evaluating quality and inferring levels of achievement. This is similar to an extended written response assessment, but with the added benefit of being able to ask followup questions. Oral examination has great potential for use, especially given the increasing complexity of our valued educational targets, the increased diversity of students, and the complexity and cost of setting up performance assessments.

Quality control guidelines for oral examination include those listed in Chapter 6 for extended written response assessments as well as some guidelines particular to this form of assessment, as follows:

- Develop brief exercises that focus on the desired target.

- Rely on exercises that identify the knowledge to be brought to bear, specify the kind of reasoning students are to use, and identify the standards you will apply in evaluating responses.

- Ask questions using the easiest possible vocabulary and grammatical construction. Don't let language get in the way of allowing students to show what they know.

- Present one set of questions to all students; don't offer choices of questions to answer.

- Develop written scoring criteria or a checklist of desirable features of a response in advance of the assessment. Be sure that qualified experts in the field would agree with the features of a sound response.

- Be sure criteria separate content and reasoning targets from facility with verbal expression.

- Prepare in advance to accommodate the needs of any students who may confront language proficiency barriers.

- Have a checklist, rating scale, or other method of recording results ready to use at the time of the assessment.

- If necessary, audiotape responses for later reevaluation.

For an example of how an oral examination might be used to contribute to a final grade, consider this test developed by a foreign language teacher for her first-year students. One of the important goals for the term was the ability to engage in short social conversations. She specified the contexts in which students were to learn to converse, (e.g., meeting someone for the first time, talking about your school, talking about your family, asking directions), and students practiced such discussions with each other over the course of the term. As part of the final exam, the teacher drew one of the topics at random for each student, who then was responsible for conducting the conversation.

Running Records

A common form of reading assessment in primary grades is what is known as a *running record*. This part performance assessment, part personal communication is a direct observation of oral reading skills, which can be used as either a summative assessment *of* learning or, more commonly, a diagnostic or an ongoing formative assessment. In early grades it can be used to identify which students do not have the basic reading skills needed for a successful school experience and who therefore need additional time and intervention.

In one version, teachers use an oral reading rubric to determine proficiency in accuracy, rate, and fluency. They administer the assessment individually to students, which typically takes no more than 10 minutes per student. The teacher introduces a task and passage, then asks students to read aloud. While students are reading, the teacher evaluates one or more of the following characteristics:

- *Rate*—How many words read aloud in a specified time or how long it takes the student to read the passage aloud

- *Accuracy*—How many errors the student makes in word recognition

- *Phrasing/fluency*—The ability to read the passage with awareness of syntax and expression

In addition, sometimes teachers assess student comprehension by asking readers to recall, organize, or summarize what they read.

Clearly, a major drawback to this format of assessment is the amount of time it takes to administer oral exams. The foreign language teacher mentioned found a way to minimize the time by engaging in only one conversation per student, still a significant time commitment, but the only way to measure the learning target accurately. If the purpose of the assessment is formative rather than summative, students can question, or in the foreign language example, converse with, each other. Of course this requires a good rubric, one that students have been taught how to use.

Journals and Logs

Sometimes personal interactions take a written form. Students can share views, experiences, insights, and information about important learnings by describing them to their teacher in a written form—by using journals. This can be especially helpful if teachers assign writing tasks that cause students to center on particularly important achievement

targets. Further, teachers can then provide students with written feedback. In addition, because these written records accumulate over time, students can use them to reflect on their improvement as learners—the heart of assessment *for* learning.

Four particular forms bear consideration: response journals, personal writing journals or diaries, dialog journals, and learning logs.

Response Journals

Response journals are most useful in situations where we ask students to read and construct meaning from literature, such as in the context of reading and English instruction. As they read, students write about their reactions. Typically, we provide structured assignments to guide them, including such tasks as the following:

- Analyze characters in terms of key attributes or contribution to the story.

- Analyze evolving story lines, plots, or story events.

- Compare one piece of literature or character to another.

- Anticipate or predict upcoming events.

- Evaluate either the piece as a whole or specific parts in terms of appropriate criteria.

- Suggest ways to change or improve character, plot, or setting, defending your suggestions.
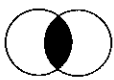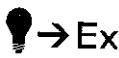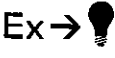
Assessment *for* Learning with Response Journals

One interesting example of the use of a response journal to help students learn more deeply comes from Janice Knight: "Most students' initial efforts at writing journal entries were lengthy, literal accounts about what was read. These boring responses, displaying a lack of critical thinking, filled page after page in their journals. It seemed that demonstration lessons on how to [think more deeply] were needed." So, she taught students how to use a system for coding their journal entries for the types of thinking displayed. She taught the codes one at a time, using teacher modeling and having students practice writing about what they read showing a specific type of thinking. She saw a dramatic increase in the depth of thinking displayed in journal entries. By having the students code their responses, "not only does the teacher have a record of the type of thinking that went into their creation, so do the students. They can readily self-evaluate and work independently

towards improving their responses. The students are also more motivated to include different kinds of thinking in their entries" (Knight, 1990, p. 42).

Table 8.1 shows a set of symbols we devised for coding response journal entries according to the various patterns of reasoning discussed in Chapter 3—recall, analysis, synthesis, classifying, comparing, contrasting, inference, and evaluation.

Table 8.1   Icons for Student Self-Assessment of Response Journal Entries

R	**Recall**—Facts, plot design, sequence, details, summary. Tell the sequence of events in *The Ransom of Red Chief.*	✳	**Analysis**—Ingredients, component parts, internal functioning. How did the author create a mood of happiness?
↻	**Synthesis**—Pool or integrate information to reach a new insight. What do you conclude from the two authors' visions of leadership?	⊞	**Classify**—Organize into categories. What types of stories did we read this year?
◑	**Compare**—Comparison, similarity. How are the main characters in X and Y alike?	◖◗	**Contrast**—Contrast, difference, distinction, discrimination, differentiation. How are the styles of A and B different?
💡→Ex	**Idea to Example**—Analogy, categorization, deduction, prediction, consequence. In our list of stories, find some examples of friendship.	Ex→💡	**Example to Idea**—Induction, conclusion, generalization, finding essence, hypothesis. What is the main theme of this story?
⚖	**Evaluation**—Value, judgment, rating. Was Ahab right to chase the whale? Why or why not? Did you like the plot? Why or why not?		

Source: Adapted by permission from Lyman, F. (1987). "The Thinktrix: A Classroom Tool for Thinking in Response to Reading." In *Reading: Issues and Practices. Yearbook of the State of Maryland International Reading Association Council.* Vol. 4. pp. 15–18.

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Activity 8.5 Journal Icons

Part 1: Refine the journal icons.

1. If you are keeping a learning log, use the icons in Table 8.1 to classify the types of entries you have made.

2. Review the procedures for Part 2. Discuss any questions or issues you might have. Revise the icon list or descriptors as needed.

3. Look at Figure 2.2, "Seven Strategies of Assessment *for* Learning," in Chapter 2. Identify which strategies Part 2 employs.

Part 2: Use the journal icons to help students understand how to incorporate various patterns of reasoning into their response journal writing.

1. Prepare a bulletin board displaying the journal icons.

2. Find examples from journal entries that show the type of reasoning you want to encourage.

3. Prepare a lesson that teaches students one of the cues. Plan how you'll introduce the usefulness of icons to students, how you'll model the particular pattern of reasoning you want students to practice, how you'll use the sample journal entries to give students practice at recognizing instances of the pattern of reasoning, and how you'll ask students to generate their own journal entries that illustrate the desired reasoning pattern.

4. Try out the lesson(s) and share the results with your learning team.

Personal Writing Journals

Personal writing journals or diaries represent the least structured of the journal options. In this case, we give students time during each instructional day to write in their journals. The focus of their writing is up to them, as is the amount they write. Sometimes we look at the writing to gain information, while at other times the writing is solely for the student's use. It is important to establish a clear purpose and audience for the personal writing journal at the outset. If it is to be used for student practice, then, while we may read it, our comments will provide descriptive rather than evaluative feedback. If the journal is purely for the student's

use, then if we read it, we comment only at the invitation of the student. When the personal writing journal is to be evaluated, either we or the student, or both, make judgments. Often we encourage novice writers to experiment in their journals with new forms of writing, such as dramatic dialogue, poetry, or some other art form. Sometimes students use their journals as a place to store ideas or questions, as a seedbed for future writing topics. Personal journals offer students the opportunity to write for personal enjoyment and still provide both themselves and us with evidence over time of their improvement as writers.

Dialogue Journals

Dialogue journals capture conversations between students and teachers in the truest sense of that idea. As teaching and learning proceed, students write messages to us conveying thoughts and ideas about the achievement expected, self-evaluations of progress, points of confusion, or important new insights, and periodically turn in their journals. We read the messages and reply, clarifying as needed, evaluating an idea, or amplifying a key point, then return the journals to the students. They read what we wrote, sometimes responding, and other times moving on to a new topic. This process links us with each student in a personal communication partnership.

Learning Logs

Learning logs ask students to keep ongoing written records of the following aspects of their studies:

- Achievement targets they have mastered

- Targets they have found useful and important

- Targets they are having difficulty mastering

- Learning experiences (instructional strategies) that worked particularly well for them

- Experiences that did not work for them

- Questions that have come up along the way that they want help with

- Ideas for important study topics or learning strategies that they might like to try in the future

The goal in the case of learning logs is to have students reflect on, analyze, describe, and evaluate their learning experiences, successes, and challenges, writing about the conclusions they draw.

Possible Sources of Bias That Can Distort Results

There are several potential sources of bias that might distort the results of personal communication assessment. Since personal communication overlaps with performance assessment when assessing oral skills such as second-language fluency and oral presentations, it can fall prey to the same sorts of problems as performance assessment—tasks that don't elicit the needed performance, poor or nonexistent performance criteria and rubrics, lack of consistency in using rubrics, and tasks that don't match rubrics.

Also, because personal communication overlaps with extended written response when assessing knowledge and reasoning, it can fall into the same traps, such as unclear questions, poor or nonexistent scoring guides and rubrics, lack of the English skills needed to show what is known, and exercises that don't make clear the knowledge to be brought to bear, the kind of reasoning to use, or the standards to be used in evaluating responses.

There are also some potential pitfalls that apply only to personal communication:

- Trying to remember everything without writing it down. Keeping good written records is important.

- Unconscious personal and professional filters, developed over years of experience, through which we hear and process student responses. Such filters allow us to interpret and act on the achievement information that comes to us through observation and personal communication. We develop such filters as efficient ways to process large quantities of information. However, sometimes they backfire. For example, if we have come to expect excellent work from a student, we might overlook a lapse in understanding by inferring that the student actually had the understanding but unintentionally left the information out of an explanation. These same filters may cause us to provide more clues to some students than to others without realizing it, thereby causing the assessment task to vary in level of difficulty unintentionally.

  Also, unexamined stereotypes might come into play. If we're not expecting a person to be good at spatial reasoning, we might underrate what we actually hear. If a student looks unkempt, we might unintentionally shade our judgment of the quality of the student's contribution to a group discussion.

- Personal communication can result in inaccurate results due to inadequacies in sampling. If we are observing students during small-group discussions, we might miss a student's finest moment or not see typical performance because there are too many students to watch or too many things to watch for. Our sample may be too small to make a good inference about student achievement.

- Group discussion can also fall prey to sources of bias due to personality. A shy person who knows the material might be too uncomfortable to speak up in a group. If the goal of the discussion is to assess understanding of the material, we may make an incorrect inference.

Summary

Personal communication assessment is an efficient and effective way to both gather information about students to plan next instructional steps, and to involve students in their own assessment. Personal communication can be used to collect information about knowledge, reasoning, and level of certain skills such as ability to speak a foreign language.

There are several different ways to collect information through interpersonal communication—instructional questions and answers, conferences and interviews, classroom discussions, oral examinations, and journals and logs. Some of these are oral and some are written.

Personal communication forms of assessment must adhere to standards of sound assessment practice. Teachers must base them on a clear idea of which learning targets are to be the focus, have a clear purpose for gathering the information, and attend to possible sources of bias that could lead to misinterpretation of student learning. Such sources of bias include the following:

- Sampling procedures that don't allow gathering enough or the right information to make a needed inference.

- Trying to keep mental records.

- Students who, for reasons of language or personality, don't or can't show what they know or can do.

- Asking the wrong type of question to get at a learning target. For example, asking recall questions when trying to get at reasoning.

- Not checking for personal filters that might create subjective interpretations of student performance.

- Not having enough proficiency with a topic to identify indicators of understanding or not understanding.

As with other forms of assessment, personal communication can be used as a platform for formative assessment and student involvement. Because of the similarities between short oral answers and selected response written questions, extended oral responses and extended written response, and personal communication and performance assessment, strategies for student involvement outlined in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 can also be used with personal communication. In this chapter we provided activities to involve students in the oral questioning of each other, using journal icons to deepen thinking, and using a group discussion rubric to promote better group discussions.

▓ *Tracking Your Learning—Possible Portfolio Entries*

Chapter 8 marks the end of Part 2 of this book. This is a good time to add portfolio entries and/or reflect on your learning as documented in your growth portfolio. Each portfolio entry that you choose should show some dimension of what you know and are able to do with respect to the learning targets illustrated in Figure 8.1 and described in Table 1.2. Be sure to include a portfolio entry cover sheet with each new entry. Such a form, provided on the CD in the file, "Portfolio Entry Cover Sheet," will prompt you to think about how each item you select for your portfolio reflects what you have learned.

▓ *Additional Portfolio Entries to Represent Learning from Parts 1 and 2[2]*

1. Make a list of assessments that do and don't meet standards of quality as outlined in Figure 4.4, "Potential Sources of Bias and Distortion." Briefly describe your rationale for including each on the list.

2. Write an explanation of a student-involvement strategy you have tried with your class. Give an account of what you and your students did, what worked well, whether you would try it again, and what you would do differently, if anything.

3. Construct a concept map that shows your current understanding of how the following topics link:

Selected Response	Essay	Assessment Methods
Performance Assessment	Products	Fill in the Blank
Constructed Response	Dispositions	True/False
Reasoning	Learning Targets	Personal Communication
Skills	Matching	Knowledge/ Understanding
Sampling	Unclear Tasks	Sources of Bias & Distortion
Quality Assessment	Unclear Criteria	Problems with Test Administration

4. Outline the major learnings in Part 2 of this book. Include a statement of which major points might need to be the focus of future learning in your building or district.

5. Take another look at the previous assessments in your portfolio. Amend your commentary on their quality. (Do not remove your original commentary.) Use the quality assessment rubrics on the CD in the file, "Assessment Quality Rubrics," to help direct your commentary. What difference do you find in the content and depth of your original commentary versus your amended commentaries?

6. Select a new assessment (test, quiz, essay test, or performance assessment) that you have recently used or taken. This can be one that someone else developed or it can be one that you developed yourself. Using the quality assessment rubrics on the CD in the file, "Assessment Quality Rubrics," reflect on the quality of this assessment and write a brief analysis. What are its strengths? What parts might be improved?

7. Write a brief comparison of the quality of the three assessments you have evaluated. Is the quality improving over time? How do you know?

8. Take the "Confidence Questionnaire" (on the CD) again. How is your classroom assessment confidence changing over time?

9. Analyze the content of your assessment growth portfolio for sampling and potential sources of bias and distortion. Would a reader of your portfolio get an accurate view of your confidence and competence in classroom assessment? Would a reader get an accurate picture of (1) your knowledge of quality and ability to apply this knowledge in developing and selecting assessments for use, or (2) your knowledge of assessment *for* learning and application of that knowledge in the classroom? Consult Figure 4.4 for a summary of potential sources of bias and distortion. What should you do to avoid or correct these potential problems?

10. Review previous portfolio entries and note your progress in confidence and competence. For example:

   • How has your thinking about assessment changed over time?

   • What are you doing differently in the classroom as the result of what you've learned so far?

   • What impact have you noticed on students? Colleagues? What evidence do you have for this impact?

   • What questions from the beginning of your study can you now answer? What new questions do you have?

Notes

1. Portions of this chapter have been reprinted and adapted from Chapter 7, pp. 177–198, of R. J. Stiggins, *Student-Involved Assessment* for *Learning*, 4th ed., 2005, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall. Copyright © 2005 by Pearson Education, Inc. Reprinted and adapted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc.

2. The following portfolio entries have been adapted from pp. 198 and 200–201 of J. A. Arter & K. U. Busick, *Practice with Student-Involved Classroom Assessment*, 2001, Portland, OR: Assessment Training Institute. Copyright © 2006, 2001 Educational Testing Service. Adapted by permission.