

How Can We Capture Children's Full Range Of Abilities?



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One of the most depersonalizing aspects of the education system is assessments. A child's whole educational career is reduced to a set of numbers or letters when they graduate school at eighteen, and these combinations determine which universities or jobs they can apply for. The nuance of each person is forgotten and what's left is a standardized display of who this person is.





Assessment that reduces individuals this way is useful to show who has understood a subject and who hasn't, but unfortunately, it isn't always the best way to show a person's skills and talents. Particularly for children with learning difficulties such as dyslexia, it can be an irresponsible way of showing their abilities as often standardized assessment methods do not capture their true abilities.

Moreover, in a world where knowledge acquisition isn't as necessary as it used to be, thanks to the emergence of the internet creating a wealth of knowledge at our fingertips, what we need children to know is changing. In a world of exponential change the future is no longer certain, so the skills and knowledge that children need to thrive have changed too. More than

anything, they need skills that allow them to adapt to whatever the future throws at them and assessment should reflect this readiness.

In a sea of standardized assessment, Two Rivers School stands out like a beacon of hope. Situated in the USA, Two Rivers combines summative assessment with formative assessment to create a more holistic way of checking in with every student to create a personalized development response.

‘Summative assessment is the opportunity to determine if our students are mastering the goals we have for them as well as their own personal goals,’ explains Jeff Heyck-Williams, Director of Curriculum and Instruction at Two Rivers School. ‘However, formative assessment plays a far greater role in the learning process because it is all about using assessment to help students achieve their goals. Formative assessment is all about both figuring out where the gaps are between where students want to go, where they are, and informing us of the skills and knowledge they need to develop to close those gaps. If education is ultimately about student learning, shouldn't we be leveraging assessment primarily to further that learning, not just reporting whether it occurred or not?’

Assessment has traditionally played the role of telling others what an individual knows, but as we develop education in order to be more holistic and to benefit every child, it makes sense to innovate assessment to make it more meaningful. Surely, this meaning should be primarily for the children undertaking the studies rather than solely for the benefit of others, and that's where formative assessment can be particularly powerful.

However, knowing how to create a formative assessment practice can be difficult for those unfamiliar with it, particularly as teachers are already short on time. That's why it's key to look at effective practices, such as Two Rivers, to take inspiration from. ' (At Two Rivers) teachers regularly collect data on student outcomes to better inform next steps in their teaching,' explains Heyck-Williams, continuing, 'our innovation around assessments of critical thinking and problem-solving are a perfect example of this. Knowing that we want students to improve their problem-solving skills, we utilize a targeted rubric to assess the components of a students problem-solving process. Based on the data they collect, they are able to give students targeted feedback and plan lessons to improve their skills.'





However, it's not just a teacher's job to make sure formative assessment is effective. The second part to Two Rivers assessment is student involvement. 'It is important for students to know where they are in relation to their goals,' says Heyck-Williams. 'At Two Rivers, students often look at their assignments, assessments and grades with an eye towards what their work and teacher feedback tells them about their own learning. Students use assessment in this way to refine their goals and make plans to close the gaps

between where they currently are and where they want to go in their learning.'

We cannot make education personal without children's involvement too. It's a collaborative project between the educator and the student, so that together they can create a meaningful educational experience. Empowering children this way helps them to truly understand what they're learning, why and how to improve, helping them to reach their goals so they can go out into the world with the grades they need to achieve their dreams. Too often the assessment system is a mystery to children. Understanding their feedback and knowing how to improve can revolutionize the educational experience for children and help them understand how to succeed.

The Two Rivers approach doesn't just help children understand the assessment system or help educators to know where the gaps are in a child's knowledge before the summative assessments, it also allows for alternative skill sets to be recorded and assessed too. Heyck-Williams argues that when we only focus on traditional areas like literacy, math and science, 'our students lose the depth of skills like critical thinking and problem-solving that they will need, and our students miss the opportunities to deepen their learning.'

At Two Rivers, our approach has been to deepen student learning by focusing on a broader set of student outcomes than just basic skills and knowledge. By developing and utilizing assessment tools that target skills like critical thinking and problem-solving or social and emotional learning, we both elevate the importance of these critical life skills and provide direct opportunities for students to develop them.

Knowing how to capture these complex skill sets can be a hurdle for today's educators. Two Rivers have developed a system to track these skills effectively by building on the work of Ron Ritchhart at Harvard University's Project Zero on thinking routines. 'We teach students routines for reasoning, decision making, and problem-solving that they can use across disciplines and contexts,' explains Heyck-Williams. 'By teaching these routines to students they learn how to make their thinking visible through verbal and written language. Once we have uncovered their thinking we are able to analyze it for strengths and ways to make improvements. We utilize a set of rubrics aligned with each of our thinking routines to pinpoint specific areas of strength and areas for growth in individual student's cognitive processing. This process has the dual benefits of helping us give directed feedback to improve students' thinking skills and of providing practice for students in communicating their ideas effectively.'

For Heyck-Williams and Two Rivers school, creating an assessment model that takes into consideration non-traditional skill sets is important if we're to prepare children for today's world. 'The need to solve complex messy problems will continue to be one of the most essential skills our students can develop,' Heyck-Williams explains, 'therefore the ability to think critically and problem-solve flexibly is essential. Our approach is helping students to develop these skills so they are prepared for their future.'

Two Rivers' personal approach to assessment also helps children with learning difficulties get to grips with what they're learning, what's expected of them and what it all means. As Heyck-Williams explains, 'Two Rivers' approach has helped students with learning difficulties by unpacking skills that have seemed too complex or nebulous in the past. People often use the term critical thinking, but don't spend the time to explain what that actually means or how a student can develop it. By using a clear thinking routine with a set of concrete components, students are able to both understand how to make a reasoned argument and improve their skills in thinking through the problem.'

Through taking inspiration from Two Rivers assessment model, educators can create an educational experience that is personalized to each student whilst also helping students to improve their grades and understand their

own learning. 'These kinds of assessment tools are about letting individual students know where they are and provide them with a roadmap on how to get to where they want to go,' says Heyck-Williams, concluding, 'This is personalization at its best.' We couldn't agree more.

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