

Concerns regarding common assessments

By Rick DuFour

I had a conversation recently with a high school faculty that expressed several concerns regarding the idea that teachers teaching the same course or grade level should have common formative assessments periodically to identify students who were experiencing difficulty, to identify strengths and weaknesses in their program, and to give each teacher feedback on the how well his or her students had learned in comparison to all the students attempting to become proficient. Here is a summary of their concerns and my responses:

1. Common assessments will require lockstep pacing and uniform instruction.

Advocates of professional learning communities do not support either lock-step pacing or uniform instruction. Teachers remain free on a day-to-day basis to make instructional decisions and PLCs benefit from diversity in instructional techniques so members can begin to observe which of those techniques are most effective in helping students achieve the intended outcomes of the unit and/or course. PLCs **do** insist that teachers agree to 1) ensure students have access to the same knowledge, skills, and dispositions regardless of the teacher to whom they are assigned and 2) to specify certain benchmark dates when the team will administer assessments to identify students who may be experiencing difficulty or areas of the curriculum needing attention. When teachers first begin this practice, we recommend they start with a minimum of four common assessments per course/subject, per year. Once they begin to see the benefits, they typically add more frequent assessments. So once again, there is no expectation that all teachers must be teaching the same content on the same day or using identical strategies. The expectation is that we will agree to teach certain concepts within the same window of time (perhaps six weeks) so that all students will be prepared for the common assessment.

2. The common assessments will limit us to a narrow focus or lower-level skills.

Teams are free to use a variety of assessment strategies, and many use performance-based assessments. The assessments can be as rigorous, varied, and authentic as the team decides and should provide the team with the information it will find most helpful in assessing its effectiveness. As an individual teacher, you can use whatever assessments you like all throughout the year, but at least four times a year we agree to use the same common assessment.

3. We are already assessing too much. This adds to the burden.

Common assessments need not be additional assessments. They should replace some of the individual assessments that teachers have traditionally given. Doug Reeves contends that American students are over-tested and under-assessed. Teachers in PLCs do not test more often, but they do use assessments that are far more powerful.

4. If we focus on student achievement on assessments we diminish our efforts to develop the whole student.

This is a false dichotomy. There is no need to choose between academic achievement and developing the character of students, fostering a love of learning, or generating good citizens for a democracy. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois is cited repeatedly as a model professional learning community. It was also cited as a national model for its attention to teaching character (see *The Good and Smart High School* by Thomas Lickona) and was the only high school in the nation cited by NASSP for two consecutive years for the exceptional service its students provide to the community.

How should PLCs decide which learning outcomes should form the focus of their common assessments?

The curriculum is loaded with standards, big ideas, enduring understandings, essential questions, performance skills, and so much more.

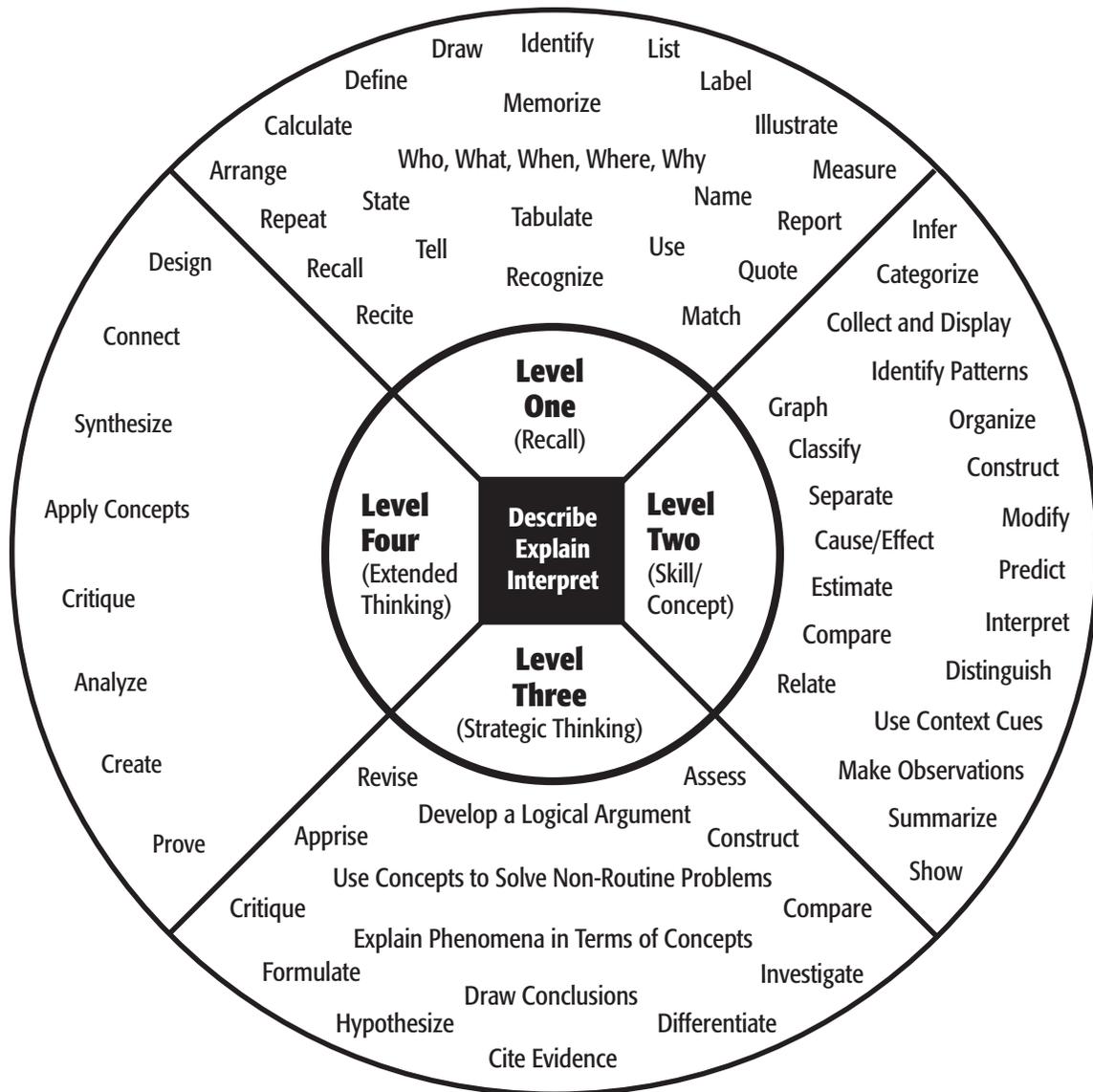
To help you separate the essential from the peripheral when deciding upon your common assessments, apply these four criteria to each standard:

1. **ENDURANCE**: Are students expected to retain the skills/knowledge long after the test is completed?
2. **SIGNIFICANCE**: Does the learning reflect higher-level thinking or depth of knowledge*? Or is it merely a series of “factlets” that lend themselves to easy recall and grading?
3. **LEVERAGE**: Is this skill/knowledge applicable to many academic disciplines?
4. **READINESS FOR THE NEXT LEVEL**: Is this skill/knowledge preparing the student for success in the next grade or course?

—Adapted from the work of Doug Reeves

*The attached Depth of Knowledge chart may be helpful in crafting more significant assessments.

Depth of Knowledge (DOK) Levels



Level One Activities	Level Two Activities	Level Three Activities	Level Four Activities
Recall elements and details of story structure, such as sequence of events, character, plot and setting.	Identify and summarize the major events in a narrative.	Support ideas with details and examples.	Conduct a project that requires specifying a problem, designing and conducting an experiment, analyzing its data, and reporting results/solutions.
Conduct basic mathematical calculations.	Use context cues to identify the meaning of unfamiliar words.	Use voice appropriate to the purpose and audience.	Apply mathematical model to illuminate a problem or situation.
Label locations on a map.	Solve routine multiple-step problems.	Identify research questions and design investigations for a scientific problem.	Analyze and synthesize information from multiple sources.
Represent in words or diagrams a scientific concept or relationship.	Describe the cause/effect of a particular event.	Develop a scientific model for a complex situation.	Describe and illustrate how common themes are found across texts from different cultures.
Perform routine procedures like measuring length or using punctuation marks correctly.	Identify patterns in events or behavior.	Determine the author's purpose and describe how it affects the interpretation of a reading selection.	Design a mathematical model to inform and solve a practical or abstract situation.
Describe the features of a place or people.	Formulate a routine problem given data and conditions.	Apply a concept in other contexts.	
	Organize, represent and interpret data.		