

January 8, 2025

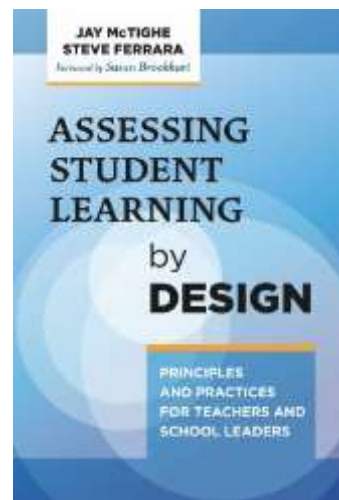
ISSN 1094-5296

**McTighe, J., & Ferrara, S. (2021). *Assessing student learning by design: Principles and practices for teachers and school leaders*. Teachers College Press.**

98 pp.

ISBN 978-0-8077-6540-1

**Reviewed by Jonathan Brinley**  
Utah State University  
United States



A newly hired high school teacher is eager to get his class set up. He feels confident about the material and his ability to communicate the concepts to the students to come. But he hasn't thought much about assessments. Of course, he is aware of the standardized state assessment at the end of the year; but the closer he gets to the first day of school, he begins to wonder how he will grade these students. He reaches out to other educators to see what they do. He reads through their syllabi and picks and chooses some activities and ideas that sound good and seem manageable for him to tackle in his first year. He gives little thought to what will help him discern what his students will know and understand, let alone to what extent they will have internalized the subject matter he is excited to share.

Unfortunately, this is a common scenario that plays out annually across the country in the waning days of summer. Understandably, a new teacher has many things to worry about, and most teachers get into teaching because they love students as well as creating an environment that engages learners. Assigning papers and projects, creating tests, and grading them? Not so much. Fortunately, there is help, and not just for new teachers.

In 2021, Teachers College Press published authors Steve Ferrara and Jay McTighe's reboot of their 1993 work, *Assessing Learning in the Classroom*. This updated offering, entitled *Assessing Student Learning by Design*, invites teachers at every level of education to be intentional in the design of their assessment activities. McTighe is widely recognized as an expert in the field. He is the co-author of 18 books on various aspects of teaching and learning. He served as the director of a consortium of school districts who were working together to develop and share formative performance assessments. He also served as a member of the National Assessment Forum, a coalition of organizations that advocate reforms in national, state, and local assessment policies and practices. For this revision, McTighe rejoined Steve Ferrara,

Brinley, J. (2025, January 8). Review of *Assessing student learning by design: Principles and practices for teachers and school leaders* by J. McTighe & S. Ferrara. *Education Review*, 32.  
<https://doi.org/10.14507/er.v32.3907>

a professional psychometrician who has worked on more than 20 state accountability testing programs and was the state director of student assessment in Maryland from 1985-1997. He is also the author of more than 50 professional journal articles focused on student assessment and learning.

While *Assessing Student Learning by Design* updates a lot of the information from the earlier offering, what remains is a three-pronged assessment planning framework that according to McTighe “has held up well over the years” (Michigan Assessment Consortium, 2021). About this framework, the authors assert that when teachers consider how best to assess their students’ learning, teachers who build on this framework will do three things: identify learning goals, clarify the purpose of the assessment, and recognize for whom the results of the assessments are intended.

This framework is founded on five principles intended to guide teachers in their thinking about the effectiveness of their classroom assessments: 1) assessments should serve learning, 2) align with teaching goals, 3) measure what matters, 4) be fair, and 5) multiple kinds of assessments provide more evidence that learning has happened. These principles are not new and are simplified and generalized versions of those laid out by other authors and organizations (Australian Skills Quality Authority, 2015; Jobs for the Future, 2018; Yale University, 2021). The foundation of these principles and the assessment-planning framework built on it are well constructed and are presented in a way that is so sensible that one would think they are intuitive.

Having considered the foundation and framework, teachers can begin thinking about the structure of an assessment tool they might employ to gather evidence of learning. Here, the authors share some formats to consider depending on a teacher’s goals. Various assessment methods are compiled into four main categories including selected response (e.g. multiple choice, true-false, matching); brief constructed response (e.g. fill-in-the-blank, short answer, label a diagram; performance-based assessments (e.g. essay, story, presentation, dance, ); and process-focused assessments (e.g. interviews, observations, learning logs, ). To illustrate these measures, multiple real-world examples of each category and from various levels of education are presented.

Naturally, when any kind of assessment is being made, a teacher must consider how to evaluate student performance. One suggested practice is for a teacher to outline the criteria or elements they use to grade a student’s effort. This list might include benchmarks of content, process, quality, and impact. A variation of a criterion list is the use of a rubric. The authors discuss four different types of rubrics: holistic, analytic, generic/task-specific, and developmental. Most educators are familiar with these, but the developmental rubric might be less well-known or used. It evaluates a student’s progress in developing a skill or ability over time, rather than a final product. This rewards a student’s effort and improvement.

At some point, of course, some measure of learning or performance must be communicated to learners, parents, school stakeholders, and in some cases, institutions of higher education. McTighe and Ferrara take the position that the choice of communication method depends on the purpose of the assessment and its intended audience. In this context, the authors present a brief discussion of the

usefulness as well as limitations of various grading practices. “Numerical scores and grades by themselves do not explicitly communicate the elements of quality and standards of performance that they are meant to reflect” (p. 51). To overcome this problem, the ideal would be to provide written, verbal, or narrative reports or hold conferences that clearly and directly connect personalized student performance with established standards. Obviously, that ideal is impractical for many levels of reporting. Accordingly, the writers recommend adherence to the four following principles of grading that would more clearly reflect a student’s accomplishments:

1. “The primary purpose of grades is to communicate student achievement based on clearly articulated learning goals and established criteria,” as opposed to being based on a student’s achievement compared to others in the class (e.g. above average, average, etc.)
2. “Grades should be based on evidence derived from sound assessment of targeted goals.” The important point here is that the assessment measures what it is intended to measure and is aligned with the goals referenced in the first principle.
3. “Separate the grading and reporting of achievement from other factors.” On this point, the authors agree with assessment and grading authority Tom Guskey in utilizing a 3Ps approach to grading and reporting: performance, process, and progress are evaluated and reported as independent variables (Guskey, 2020).
4. “Let performance grade reflect *current* [emphasis added] achievement.” (pp. 56-59)

One can appreciate these ideas and even agree with them. However, standardized systems of grading are in such wide use that it is hard to imagine how any new design could overthrow decades of established conventions. Still, adopting these ideas could create powerful changes in a teacher, a learner, and a classroom.

Taking the foregoing concepts a step further, McTighe and Ferrara encapsulate their previously shared principles and ideas into eight classroom practices that most any teacher at any level of education can incorporate. Among these, the importance of creating authentic contexts for assessments, offering appropriate choices, and providing illustrative models are highlights. It should be noted that the authors indicate they are sharing “seven classroom assessment practices” but then present eight of them leaving the reader to wonder if they misread or missed a sentence indicating a bonus practice to be added.

The authors conclude with a section of tips for school leaders as to how they might improve school-wide assessment practices. The suggestions given in this chapter are practical and easy to employ and the authors include links and resources that in-service leaders can use. Not surprisingly, many of these resources come from the authors themselves, so, from a certain perspective, it could be seen as an extended advertisement for their other works.

One job of an author is to take the reader on a journey. Other than the misstep in the chapter on practices, the writers of this book have organized their thoughts like signposts that lead the reader along in a natural flow of ideas. Throughout the

work, they present the concepts in charts that make it easy for a reader to understand and refer to when needed. One could almost skip the text and just study the charts and be rewarded.

The current debate about the efficacy of grading practices has been called, “one of the most challenging and emotionally charged conversations in today’s schools” (Feldman, 2019). In *Assessing Student Learning by Design*, authors McTighe and Ferrara add their voices to the conversation in a meaningful way. Their voice is instructive and insightful. They touch lightly on the issues of inconsistency in grading, and whether grades truly reflect learning, and how letter grades can perpetuate inequities. But their focus is on principles that, if implemented, could go a long way in helping to resolve many of these difficulties and better prepare a novice or seasoned educator stepping into a classroom.

## References

- Australian Skills Quality Authority. (2015). *Principles of assessment in the Standards for Registered Training Organisations*. <https://www.asqa.gov.au/course-accreditation/users-guide-standards-vet-accredited-courses/accredited-courses-guide-appendices/appendix-6-principles-assessment>
- Feldman, J. (2019). *Grading for equity, what it is, why it matters, and how it can transform schools and classrooms*. SAGE Publications.
- Guskey, T. (2020). *Get set. Go: Creating effective grading and reporting systems*. Solutions Tree.
- Jobs for the Future. (2018, September 10). *Ten principles for a high-quality system of assessments*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED581686.pdf>
- Michigan Assessment Consortium. (May 4, 2021). *Book chat with Jay McTighe* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/545122173/7e632bbd87>
- Yale University Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning. (2021). *Examples of formative and summative assessments*. <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/Formative-Summative-Assessments>

## About the Reviewer

**Jonathan Brinley** is a doctoral candidate at Utah State University in Logan, Utah, where he is studying Education: Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration on School Leadership. In addition to his doctoral work, Jonathan works as a professional religious educator with more than 25 years of teaching experience.



  
**Education Review**      **Reseñas Educativas**  
**Resenhas Educativas**



*Education Review/Reseñas Educativas/Resenhas Educativas* is supported by the Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, distribute, and adapt this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and *Education Review*, the changes are identified, and the same license applies to the derivative work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.



**Disclaimer:** The views or opinions presented in book reviews are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of *Education Review*.