Music educators are constantly assessing their students and themselves, and our feedback is often harsher and more exact than any rubric or test score our students will ever see. Still, determining reliable methods for assessment can be challenging. We asked four music educators who teach elementary, middle, and high school to share their perspectives on individual student assessment. This is the third article in the “Music Matters” series on teaching methods. If you missed previous installments, you can find them online at www.tmea.org/magazine in the archives or by viewing the interactive version of previous issues.

Take time to read all of the responses, not just those offered by the educator in your TMEA division. You will find that many of the answers are applicable to all music educators regardless of teaching level or ensemble type.

How do you monitor individual student understanding in a classroom setting on a daily basis?

Rene Lira, Coyle MS Band Director (Garland ISD): We have found that the best way to monitor our students’ understanding is by daily interaction with them. We try to have each student in beginning classes play individually every day (or on a weekly basis with larger classes). The key to this success is that students never know when they will be called, so hopefully they prepare daily. It is additionally important to give information in a variety of ways to accommodate the different learning styles. Constant questions and answers help to provide feedback to me. Do the students understand the lesson and the correlation to the musical performance? Plus, by constantly questioning the students, you will know if the message is coming across or if you need to continue to explain.

Janette Hess, Seabrook Intermediate Orchestra Director (Clear Creek ISD): Individual student understanding is monitored in a myriad of ways on a daily basis. It can be as simple as having students point to specific areas in their music, listening to individual students play a passage, having students provide answers to questions regarding phrasing and dynamics, and much more. I use very specific rubrics for performance evaluations that provide immediate and precise feedback. For example, a bow hold rubric would include thumb shape, index finger pronation, middle and ring finger placement, and pinky placement and shape.

Kay Payton, Hendrickson HS Choir Director (Pflugerville ISD): In 12 years of teaching, this is my first in block scheduling, so I am still retooling my assessment practices. With block scheduling, it is imperative to know where students are in the learning process. I use a multilevel approach and ask a lot of questions. I listen to students by using close proximity, sectional singing, and individual singing. I work to build relationships with each student personally and with the class as a whole. This helps them feel more comfortable singing in front of others. They are not tested every time they sing, and I make certain everyone knows that mistakes are expected and should be made loudly so they can be fixed!

Elizabeth Shier, Academy at C.F. Thomas Music Teacher (Birdville ISD): Individual student assessment is often an overwhelming concept for an elementary music teacher who teaches hundreds of students a day in often limited time frames. I encourage my students from the beginning to do their very best at all times using a four-point rubric that we discuss and define at the beginning of the year. Students self-assess quickly after every lesson before lining up to leave. Students self-assess their work and sometimes assess the work of the entire class. This often leads to great discussions. Students know they will be self-assessing after each lesson, and this often encourages more enthusiastic participation and better behavior. During a lesson, I frequently ask deeper level questions to check for understanding, and students often get to share their answers with a partner before reporting back to me. Checklists on a seating chart are also used for quick assessments. Depending on the learning objective, assessment can be in the form of a playing test as well.
What strategies do you use to assess student progress (formative) as compared to the strategies you use to assess an end product (summative)?

RL: The key for us is consistency and variety. We have weekly chair tests in both beginner band and upper-level bands. Rubrics are used to help students quantify their score. “Sounds about like an 85,” is a hard sell for students and parents. By structuring tests with number values on a variety of categories (posture, technique, etc.), students better understand their strengths and weaknesses. Having individual assessments throughout the year helps us with an end-of-year evaluation, both individually and for the band program. We use an achievement chart that allows students to reach a variety of levels based on their acquired skills. Beginners, for example, have different rankings they can achieve by passing off certain lines and successfully demonstrating specific skills. The rankings are military-based, so they can go from a private to master sergeant. Officer ranks are used at the seventh- and eighth-grade level.

JH: Assessing students formatively should be achieved in multiple ways. I use rubrics to give specific feedback for a limited number of skills or objectives. I regularly have students write in their music (dynamics, phrasing, etc.), and I grade their music based on whether they have correctly marked their music. I also have students record themselves playing an assigned passage and give them feedback and grades based on that recording. Summative assessment usually involves the students critiquing a performance of their own or another group. At the middle school level, it should include at least a word bank of terms for them to use in their critique. I often lead them with a prompt to get them focused on what I want them to discuss or write about.

KP: I use sight-singing patterns each day. Then at the end of a two-week period, each singer draws from what they like to call the “pumpkin of death,” and they sing to me the exercise they drew. Other methods I use include written exercises in a journal, evaluations after each concert or performance opportunity, weekly 10-question theory quizzes, recording in-class work for informal evaluations, and as much one-on-one vowel and vocal training as possible.

ES: Upper-grade students write reflections in a journal, including a space to answer what they learned, how this will help them in the future, their strengths, and weaknesses. We do this type of assessment on an ongoing basis. I grade these reflections with another four-point rubric, which is why lots of discussion at the beginning of the year about the rubric and grades is helpful. We often record our work and then evaluate it according to criteria the students have discussed. We decide if it’s good enough to put on the website or not, and why. With summative (end product) assessment, I use rubrics that I have given to the students as the project is assigned, again with lots of discussion about the expectations.

Discuss how advancements in technology have changed how you assess student learning.

RL: Our goal is to integrate technology to enhance the overall musical and educational experience. We are able to send and receive playing assignments over the Internet, communicate to students via text message or email, and even have live webcasts of concerts and classes. We tend to overlook the fact that many of our students simply forget to listen when they are performing or rehearsing. During class I record students using my smartphone. With it connected to our sound system via Bluetooth technology, students can immediately hear their performance, assess, and work to improve. By archiving these recordings, we can hear our progress as we prepare for concerts. It is important to remember, however, that even with all of our technical advances, a sticky note with a handwritten “good job” still has the greatest impact.

JH: Advancements in technology have added more items to our toolbox of assessment options. Wonderful programs like SmartMusic have enabled me to allow students the freedom to choose how they are assessed. Some students prefer to take several attempts and select the one they want to submit for a grade. Some prefer the one-shot approach. Spreadsheet and database programs have enabled me to track student progress more easily.

KP: Technology has changed student learning dramatically. Students want to learn everything aurally, which means I have to have more visual opportunities for them to see what they are hearing. Finale has great exercises to be used for sight-singing (I even use some of the band exercises). I can have them work individually, in pairs or as a section, to see who can sing quickly and accurately. Using sight-singing books and the projected screen allows me to isolate something more difficult. I can show a YouTube example or something from NBC’s The Sing-Off for written evaluation.

Students can now record on Charms Office Assistant and email it to me, and I can grade it at home! I can make a CD of our progress. I use Finale to make voice part CDs or an accompaniment track for rehearsal purposes. I can show videos of TMEA All-State Choirs or honor choir performances to model excellence in singing. I can assign papers on composers from any genre that students can readily find biographical information for as well as digital performances of their works.

ES: Technology has made assessment easier at times. Free recording software like Audacity makes it simple to record any part of a lesson, then listen and evaluate the recording. Videos are great to use, too, and I often record the class and then watch and assess the performance. Good recordings are then posted on our website, and I encourage students and parents to visit the website often. With SmartNotebook lessons and a SmartBoard, assessment can be built in. I plan to use Project Share this year to help me set up electronic portfolios of individual and class work as well.

Thanks go to our contributors for taking time to offer their ideas and experience. If you have follow-up questions, you can email them at the following addresses:

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For specific examples of assessment methods and rubrics offered by these contributors, go to the Music Educator Toolkit found in the Teaching Resources section of the TMEA website under the Resources menu.