

The Two Types of Progress Monitoring

PART ONE:

Previously, I expressed that one of the hot buttons in assessment is that many people have strong opinions about which tests are “good” tests, perhaps without a deep understanding of the wide variety of instruments and their best use in decision-making. This opinion seems particularly true when it comes to progress monitoring. Most educators are familiar with only one of the two types of Progress Monitoring practices: Mastery Monitoring (MM), often referred to as Short-Term Measurement (STM).

I liken Mastery Monitoring to “calorie counting” in weight loss efforts. In Mastery Monitoring, student progress is judged based on test content closely related to *what was taught* that *day* or that *week* or in that *unit*. As students ourselves, we experienced Mastery Monitoring all the time. We took end-of-the-week spelling tests, end-of-unit reading tests, quizzes, etc. Of course, there is nothing wrong with Mastery Monitoring, but, despite a common sense appeal, it presents a number of logistic and empirical challenges (e.g., tests must be developed for each objective or unit, tests are not of the same difficulty, they don’t test for retention and generalization) as well as raising some serious questions regarding meaningful gains in academic achievement. Mastery Monitoring is based on a number of fundamental assumptions that are often not supported with data.

For example, Mastery Monitoring is based on an assumption that technically sound (i.e., reliable and valid) tests are created for *each* of the units or objectives. Mastery Monitoring also is based the presumption of an instructional hierarchy, or sequence of instruction that is reflected in a curriculum scope-and-sequence (i.e., that Unit 1 must be taught before Unit 2, Unit 2 before Unit 3, and so on). However, for best quality Mastery Monitoring, it is important that this instructional hierarchy has been validated. Mastery Monitoring also is based on the assumption that if a student doesn’t pass the Mastery Monitoring test, they would *remain* in that instructional material or curriculum sequence until it was mastered. Mastery Monitoring presents teachers with a number of other challenges. The test materials are constantly changing and evaluating rates of improvement over time is difficult because some units or objectives may be harder than others.



The primary advantage of Mastery Monitoring is high instructional validity. With quality tests, Mastery Monitoring can answer the question “*did the student(s) learn what I taught this week (or day, month, or unit)*”. For teachers, this is a very important question. If I am teaching students to read a particular type of multi-syllabic words, I would like to know how well they are doing. However, Mastery Monitoring typically doesn’t effectively answer a broader and very important question: *is the student(s) becoming a better reader*. A student may pass an end-of-unit test and although they have mastered a specific skill, they are not becoming a better reader.

Like my analogy to calorie counting, a person can meet their daily calorie count goal—did I do what I intended to do today?-- and not lose weight. The bottom line is that I must lose weight and I should measure the effects of my efforts in a different way, on a more general outcome, weight loss. I need to stand on a different scale. In the sequel to this blog entry, I will discuss the equivalent to a weight scale in education. This approach, General Outcome Measurement (GOM) is different and less familiar to educators but provides a simple and scientifically sound way to gauge student basic skills progress.

References

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