**Week of March 28, 2011**

**Informal Student Interviews**

**Description:**

The *Informal Student Interview* is a variation of the formal, structured student interview. This FACT involves conversational interviews with students in informal settings, such as lunch, recess, hallway talks, bus duty, riding on a bus to a field trip, and other contexts where students are not in a formal classroom setting. The *Informal Student Interview* uses a series of probing questions to sample a set of representative students for their ideas about concepts in science.

**How this FACT Promotes Learning:**

*Informal Student Interviews* provide an engaging way for students to share their thinking. Because they happen outside of a formal classroom setting, students who may be reluctant to speak out in the “judgmental” environment of a classroom may be more apt to freely share their thinking. The interviews promote metacognition by making students more aware of their own ideas and the reasons for their thinking.

**How this FACT Informs Instruction:**

Informal interviews with a handful of carefully selected students with a range of ability, diversity, and experiences enable the teacher to understand the different ideas the class is likely to have and how student ideas may have developed prior to instruction. The information helps the teacher determine an effective starting point for instruction by indicating how well students understand a concept as well as identify misconceptions, areas of confusion or difficulty, and gaps in understanding that may be common among students. The data are useful in understanding the different types of ideas students are likely to bring to a planned instructional unit, modifications that should be considered, and the types of prior experiences or reasoning that informed their preconceptions.

**Design and Administration:**

Select a topic that is going to be taught in a future unit of instruction. Interview questions, even when used informally, should be thought about and planned in advance. Since informal interviews do not involve the structured setting of a formal student interview, open the door to spontaneous conversation with a group of students by starting off with an inviting, opening statement such as the following:

*“I was wondering if you could help me think through some ideas about science. I have been talking with several people who seem to have different ideas, and I’m curious as to what you think.”*

Pose questions so that they are clear and open-ended, and do not cue students as to the answer they think you are looking for. For example, a question might be the following:

*“Have you ever watched the liquid go up or down in a thermometer? I’m trying to figure out what would happen if I held a thermometer upside down while I put something hot on the bulb. What do you think would happen to the liquid inside the thermometer when I hold it upside down and put something hot on it?”*

Allow students to share their different ideas but also probe for their explanations. For example, Sam says, “Well, I think the red stuff won’t go anywhere because it’s used to going up when it gets bigger.” Jenna says, “It will go down in the same place it would go if it were held the right way.” Other students jump in and share their ideas.

At this point you might say,

*“I’m hearing several different ideas—some of you are saying the liquid in the thermometer won’t go up or down; it will stay the same. Some of you think it will be pushed downward. And some of you think it will only move a tiny bit. Can you tell me more about why you think that?”*

This provides the entry point for students to further explain their thinking. Other questions asked might include “Have you ever tried anything like this? How do you think a thermometer works?” Continue asking questions that will help you understand how students think about the concept or phenomenon. Make sure you do not interject any bias or leading statements into the questions. When you are finished, thank the students for sharing with you. After the conversation, make notes describing the important things you heard.

**General Implementation Attributes:**

Ease of Use: High Time Demand: Medium Cognitive Demand: Medium/High

**Modifications:**

This strategy can be modified as a formal, structured interview, focusing on one student at a time. The scope and type of questions should match the developmental levels of the students.

**Caveats:**

Keep in mind that interviews elicit the most useful information when the students have a good rapport with the teacher. It is essential to help the students feel relaxed. They should consider the verbal exchange as a fun chance to talk with the teacher outside of a formal classroom learning experience. Remember this should be a friendly conversation about the topic—not an interrogation! Do not correct, revise, or provide instruction when the students are sharing their ideas with you. This is not intended to be a teachable moment but rather an opportunity for students to openly share their thinking with you in a nonjudgmental way. Resist the temptation to pass judgment on their ideas with statements such as “Oh, that’s a great idea,” “Well, that’s not quite what I am looking for,” or “Are you sure about that?”

**Disciplines this FACT can be used in:**

This FACT works well in science, math, social studies, and health.

**Example Stems for Informal Interview Prompts:**

* *What can you tell me about …?*
* *Have you ever tried to …? What happened?*
* *Have you ever seen a …? What can you tell me about it?*
* *What does it take to …?*
* *What does it mean when someone says …?*
* *The other day I saw … What could that be?*
* *What do you think causes …?*
* *How can I explain this to my friend?*
* *Is there some way you can demonstrate this?*
* *Can you tell me more about that?*
* *Can you help me understand …?*
* *Some people think … What are your ideas about this?”*
* *What do you think would happen if …?*
* *Did you learn this in school? If not, where did your ideas come from?*
* *What do you think is different about …?*
* *What do you think is the same about …?*
* *How could you convince others about …?*
* *Why do you think there are so many different ideas about this?*

*Keeley, Paige. (2008) Science Formative Assessment: 75 Practical Strategies for Linking Assessment, Instruction, and Learning. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press*