VOL. 2

## Uncovering Student Ideas In Science

## 25 More Formative Assessment Probes

By Page Keeley, Francis Eberle, and Joyce Tugel



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# Contents

Foreword		vii
Pref	face	
•	Overview	ix
•	Next Steps	xi
•	Acknowledgments	xii
•	About the Authors	xiii

#### Introduction

•	Probes as Assessment for Learning	1
•	Linking Probes, Teaching, and Learning	3
•	Research Supporting the Use of Probes	4
•	Taking Into Account Students' Ideas	5
•	Suggestions for Embedding Probes in Instruction	7
•	Using Teacher Notes That Accompany the Probes	9
•	Vignette on Teaching Density	.13
•	Concept Matrices and Probe Set	. 15
•	References	. 15

#### **Physical Science Assessment Probes**

	Concept Matrix	
1	Comparing Cubes	19
2	Floating Logs	27
3	Floating High and Low	
4	Solids and Holes	41
5	Turning the Dial	47
6	Boiling Time and Temperature	53
7	Freezing Ice	59
8	What's in the Bubbles?	65

9	Chemical Bonds71
10	Ice-Cold Lemonade
11	Mixing Water

#### **Life Science Assessment Probes**

	Concept Matrix	92
12	Is It a Plant?	
13	Needs of Seeds	
14	Plants in the Dark and Light	
15	Is It Food for Plants?	
16	Giant Sequoia Tree	
17	Baby Mice	
18	Whale and Shrew	
19	Habitat Change	

#### **Earth and Space Science Assessment Probes**

	—	
	Concept Matrix	
20	Is It a Rock? (Version 1)	151
21	Is It a Rock? (Version 2)	
22	Mountaintop Fossil	
23	Darkness at Night	
24	Emmy's Moon and Stars	
25	Objects in the Sky	

Index	19	)]	l

## Foreword

While writing this foreword, I found myself revisiting the 50-odd years of my involvement in science education. I recalled the many ideas, techniques, concepts, and research findings that have passed through my experience and flowed into my teaching repertoire like so much effluent through the filtering rushes in a stream. Some remain vital today and others still cling to the stalks, tried, tested, and found wanting.

I remember so vividly the night of October 4, 1957, when as a nation we were alerted to the beeping of Sputnik as it circled our planet, totally unaware of the influence its presence would have on science education over the next decade. It marked not only the beginning of the space race but the beginning of the rapid and frantic attempts of our nation to "beef up" the science, math, and engineering skills of our students. Science finally had a real place in the school curriculum. The Russians had beaten us to space and we were worried about our future as a nation! The United States responded swiftly with the National Defense Education Act, which allowed teachers like myself to update our content at summer institutes and provided for the development of a different kind of curriculum for school science.

Since then there have been many innovations in our field, including the famed "alphabet soup" curriculum projects of the 1950s and 1960s (e.g., SCIS, SAPA, COPES, Harvard Project Physics) and subsequent curriculum projects such as Insights, GEMS, AIMS, STC, and FOSS.

Then came the advent of the standards decade with Project 2061 and the *Benchmarks for Science Literacy* (AAAS 1993) and the *National Science Education Standards* (NRC 1996). We finally had a guide to what content should be taught and how it should be presented. Many of the states then developed their own versions of the standards, but there was uncertainty about how to use standards on the local level.

In 2005, Page Keeley authored Science Curriculum Topic Study: Bridging the Gap Between Standards and Practice, which was the first comprehensive guide to help us bridge the gap between the two sets of national standards, research on student learning, and teaching practice. This was a timely, muchneeded book.

Following the development of state standards, each state instituted ways to hold schools accountable for teaching to the standards. For

#### Foreword

many states, this resulted in "high-stakes" tests, which were enshrined in legislation. Schools gave these tests to students in the spring and received the results sometime during the next school year. The accountability factor was there, but it did little for the teachers who wanted to improve current learning for their students. Many school districts implemented a teaching unit for selected grades entitled "Review for the Test." I thought to myself, "Maybe this really is a good time to retire!"

Many of us believed that teachers needed a way to find out what their students knew, what kind of preconceptions students brought to the classroom, and what teachers could do with this information to improve instruction. Again, Page Keeley and her team from the Maine Mathematics and Science Alliance entered the picture, along with the National Science Teachers Association, with the first volume of Uncovering Student Ideas in Science: 25 Formative Assessment Probes, published in 2005. This book focused on helping teachers discern their students' thinking about different science topics. It also helped teachers figure out what to do with this information and where to find help in moving their students to a new and deeper understanding of science concepts.

A workable strategy for formative assessment was now available to the busy teacher. The probes published in the first volume of *Uncovering Student Ideas in Science* were a success, and teachers from all over the country began to find that formative assessment can help them become better teachers. This may indeed have been an example of the "tipping point" that Malcolm Gladwell (2000) talks about in his book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference.* I knew it was mine. Finding this kind of innovation is exciting to me because teachers once again can be in charge of classroom instruction. The arrival of a truly inquiry-based focus on science education, coupled with assessment, is what I and so many others have been waiting for.

Well, doesn't a successful book deserve a sequel? Here it is, with 25 new probes and accompanying teacher guides. This is the kind of innovation that is enough to keep an old dog like me barking out there in the field for a few more years. Woof!

> Dr. Richard Konicek-Moran Professor Emeritus University of Massachusetts, Amherst

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## Preface

#### **Overview**

Since the release of the first volume of Uncovering Student Ideas in Science: 25 Formative Assessment Probes (Keeley, Eberle, and Farrin 2005), science educators have shown widespread interest in using formative assessment probes to identify the variety of ideas students bring to their learning and to design instruction based on these preconceptions. This shift from an overemphasis on summative assessment at the end of instruction to a balanced system of formative and summative assessment that happens before, throughout, and at the end of instruction has occurred at the practitioner, researcher, and even policy levels. To understand the reasons for this shift, it will help to briefly review the evolution of formative assessment.

As with the acceptance of new science knowledge and theories, so the emergence and building of new ideas can result in new understandings. Typically a new idea in science is not discovered without previous study and research that has collected a body of evidence in support of the new idea. As the evidence begins to mount and become overwhelming, a point is reached in which the idea becomes accepted and "discovered," often resulting in a new paradigm (Kuhn 1962). The recent research and discoveries that support formative assessment have come about in a similar fashion, causing a paradigm shift in assessment beliefs and practices. While we cannot list everyone who has contributed to the recent "revolution" in accepting formative assessment as a powerful classroom strategy, we would like to acknowledge several of the researchers, assessment specialists, science educators, and practitioners who have sparked our interest, expanded our knowledge base, and helped shape the ideas we include in this book.

Some of the early pioneers in examining students' ideas in science during the 1980s were Rosalind Driver, Edith Guesne, Andrée Tiberghien, Wynne Harlen, Roger Osborne, and Peter Freyberg. They were instrumental in raising science educators' awareness of the use of students' ideas in science as a starting point for effective instruction. In the 1990s Audrey Champagne, Bonnie Shapiro, Lillian McDermott, and Jim Minstrel further articulated the different purposes and kinds of diagnostic, formative, and summative informa-

#### Preface

tion that science teachers can gain through assessment. Philip Sadler and Matthew Schneps brought us video examples through the Private Universe Project (Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics 1995), which showed the wide range of ideas students and adults hold, even after instruction. In the same video series, Dick Konicek helped us understand the power of constructivist teaching that takes into account students' ideas. The seminal work of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Project 2061 made explicit links between student ideas and K-12 student learning goals. The summaries of the cognitive research on students' learning of particular concepts and ideas in science appeared in Chapter 15 of the Benchmarks for Science Literacy (AAAS 1993), tying research to a clear set of K–12 learning goals. The standards or benchmarks for K-12 student learning in science were now supported by a body of research.

In the late 1990s and continuing to the present, many books and articles about assessment by researchers and practitioners reached educators. Often, however, these publications failed to spell out how formative assessment can be used to improve science instruction and learning. These books were written for a broad audience of practitioners across content areas and lacked connections to the specific nuances of science as a discipline. Research from the cognitive sciences that raised the profile of formative assessment in the science classroom began to reach practitioners with the publication of *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experi* 

ence, and School (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 1999) and *How Students Learn: Science in the Classroom* (Donovan and Bransford 2005). These publications helped us understand how to create and use an assessment-centered environment that acknowledged the importance of starting with students' preconceptions, teaching for transfer, and the role of metacognition.

While new ideas about assessment were emerging in the United States, significant findings in regard to formative assessment were being implemented and disseminated in the United Kingdom. There, researchers and practitioners published resources for teachers that included a variety of science assessment strategies designed to elicit students' ideas and spark inquiries; these ideas and inquiries could lead students to construct new understandings that resolve the dissonance between their preconceptions and scientific explanations (Naylor and Keogh 2000).

The metastudy of formative assessment by Black and Wiliam (1998) crystallized the purposes and effectiveness of formative assessment in instruction as "assessment for learning" rather than "assessment of learning." Black and Wiliam provided evidence for educators that formative assessment is a powerful instructional strategy and includes a variety of forms and purposes. They described how assessment is purposefully used to guide and inform instruction, not to just note in some formal or informal fashion what students are thinking. They further articulated how formative assessment plays out in the science classroom (Black and Harrison 2004).

In 2003 the Maine Mathematics and Science Alliance received a National Science Foundation grant to develop a set of materials to help K-16 educators link national standards and research on student learning to classroom practice. The resulting publication, Science Curriculum Topic Study: Bridging the Gap Between Standards and Practice (Keeley 2005), describes the process used to develop the probes in this book. This process links the concepts and ideas from national and state standards to the research on student misconceptions. The information is then used to develop formative assessment probes that reveal the range of ideas noted in the research as well as unique ideas some individual students may hold. The process was applied to develop the first set of 25 probes in Volume 1 of Uncovering Student Ideas in Science (Keeley, Eberle, and Farrin 2005) and has been used extensively in professional development to help teachers develop their own probes. Together, these two publications and this new book comprise a powerful set of tools to enhance and extend K-12 science teachers' use of formative assessment.

Collectively, these evolving contributions by researchers, assessment specialists, science education specialists, and practitioners have informed our development of the assessment probes for the *Uncovering Student Ideas in Science* series. It is our hope that the books in this series will support an idea-centered classroom in which teachers use the probes in conjunction with a variety of instructional techniques and questioning strategies. Such instructional practice can make students' thinking and learning visible for the purpose of guiding both students and teachers through the learning process.

Formative assessment is a key feature of classrooms where successful teaching and learning are taking place. The environment of an assessment- and idea-centered classroom is one in which students feel safe to express their ideas, know their ideas are important regardless of whether they are right or wrong, engage in deep thinking and reflection, and have opportunities to test their ideas to revise and improve their thinking. We hope this book can support such an environment.

#### **Next Steps**

Uncovering Student Ideas in Science is planned as a series of formative assessment probe books, each volume describing a new application and providing 25 new probes. Volume 1 provided an overview of formative assessment and formative assessment probes. This volume (Volume 2) focuses on ways to use formative assessment to teach for conceptual change. In the third volume of Uncovering Student Ideas in Science, we will describe ways teachers can individually use the probes for their professional development as well as ways to develop professional learning communities that engage teachers in examining student work and thinking.

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Hannah is boiling water in a glass tea kettle. She notices bubbles forming on the bottom of the kettle that rise to the top and wonders what is in the bubbles. She asks her family what they think, and this is what they say:

Dad: "They are bubbles of heat."

Calvin: "The bubbles are filled with air."

Grandma: "The bubbles are an invisible form of water."

Mom: "The bubbles are empty—there is nothing inside them."

Lucy: "The bubbles contain oxygen and hydrogen that separated from the water."

Which person do you most agree with and why? Explain your thinking.





## What's in the Bubbles?

#### **Teacher Notes**



#### Purpose

The purpose of this assessment probe is to elicit students' ideas about particles during a change in state. The probe is designed to find out if students recognize that the bubbles formed when water boils are the result of liquid water changing into water vapor.

#### **Related Concepts**

atoms or molecules, boiling and boiling point, change in state, energy

#### Explanation

The best response is Grandma's: The bubbles are an invisible form of water. This invisible water is called water vapor, a gaseous form

of water that is not visible; it is unlike steam, which contains some condensed liquid water. When water is heated, the energy supplied to the system results in an increase in molecular motion. If enough heat is supplied, the molecules have so much energy that they can no longer remain loosely connected, sliding past one another as they do in a liquid. The energy now allows the attractive forces between water molecules to be overcome, and they form an "invisible" gas in the form of water vapor. Since the molecules in the gas phase are so much farther apart than in the liquid phase, they have a much lower density, are more buoyant (causing them to "bubble up"), and escape into the air. The bubble is the invisible water vapor.

#### **Curricular and Instructional Considerations**

#### **Elementary Students**

At the elementary level, students have experiences observing changes in state. The idea of change is connected to physical properties of materials by subjecting materials to heating and freezing. Water is often used as a familiar material for observing phase changes. Elementary students know change in states of water from the solid to liquid to gas phase, although the change from liquid to gas phase is a more abstract idea developed more fully in upper elementary grades.

In early elementary grades, students' experience with bubbles that result when water boils is primarily observational and is often linked to experiences at home boiling water on a stove. It is too early to introduce the abstract idea of invisible water molecules that make up water vapor. However, students can develop the precursor idea that water, in the form of invisible water vapor, escapes from the surface of an uncovered liquid. It may be too soon to introduce the idea that bubbles of boiling water contain water vapor, although students can observe steam going into the air from water that boils, even though steam contains some tiny droplets of water. Students must understand the simpler idea that water goes into the air in a form we cannot see before the idea of kinetic molecular theory, which helps explain why bubbles form and what they are, is introduced in middle school. The notion that water vapor is a gas is a grade-level expectation in the

national standards. Children develop conceptions about bubbles early on through their everyday experiences, so it is not too early to ask students their ideas about boiling and bubbles. However, it is best to hold off on expecting a scientific explanation until students are ready.

#### Middle School Students

In middle school, students have opportunities to examine the characteristics of different states of matter, and they begin to conceptualize the particle movements associated with phase changes from solid to liquid to gas. Students observe and measure characteristic properties such as boiling point and melting point. Students have had varied experiences with boiling water. They compare evaporation of a liquid under ordinary ambient conditions as well as in situations where increased application of heat is involved, such as boiling water. This probe is useful in determining students' preconceptions related to the common phenomenon of bubbles forming in boiling water.

#### **High School Students**

During high school, instructional opportunities connect the macroscopic properties of substances studied in middle school to a microscopic level. An understanding of kinetic molecular theory is a grade-level expectation in the standards that can be used to explain what the bubbles in boiling water are. This probe may be useful in determining if students revert to their earlier preconceptions about bubbles



**Topic: Changes of State** Go to: www.scilinks.org Code: USIS2H67

or if they can explain what is happening at a molecular level.

#### **Administering the Probe**

You may wish to use visual props for this probe. Bring a beaker of water or some other clear glass, boiling-safe container to a full boil so that students can see the bubbles forming and rising to the surface. Be sure students are wearing safety goggles and are not too close to the heat source if they are observing the boiling up close. Continue to heat the boiling water as students respond to the probe and explain their thinking. Teachers may want to continue to probe students' ideas about boiling by combining this probe with the "Turning the Dial" (p. 47) and "Boiling Time and Temperature" (p. 53) probes.

#### **Related Ideas in National** Science Education Standards (NRC 1996)

#### K–4 Properties of Objects and Materials

 Materials can exist in different states—solid, liquid, and gas. Some common materials, such as water, can be changed from one state to another by heating or cooling.

#### 5–8 Properties and Changes in Properties of Matter

• A substance has characteristic properties, such as density, a boiling point, and solubility, all of which are independent of the amount of the sample. A mixture of substances often can be separated into the original substances using one or more of the characteristic properties.

#### 9–12 Structure and Properties of Matter

★ Solids, liquids, and gases differ in the distances and angles between molecules or atoms and therefore the energy that binds them together. In solids the structure is nearly rigid; in liquids molecules or atoms move around each other but do not move apart; and in gases molecules or atoms move almost independently of each other and are mostly far apart.

#### Related Ideas in Benchmarks for Science Literacy (AAAS 1993)

#### 3–5 Structure of Matter

• Heating and cooling cause changes in the properties of materials. Many kinds of changes occur faster under hotter conditions.

#### 3–5 The Earth

★ When liquid water disappears, it turns into a gas (vapor) in the air and can reappear as a liquid when cooled, or as a solid if cooled below the freezing point of water. Clouds and fog are made up of tiny droplets of water.

#### 6-8 Structure of Matter

★ Atoms and molecules are perpetually in motion. Increased temperature means greater average energy of motion, so most substances

 $<sup>\</sup>star$  Indicates a strong match between the ideas elicited by the probe and a national standard's learning goal.

expand when heated. In solids, the atoms are closely locked in position and can only vibrate. In liquids, the atoms or molecules have higher energy, are more loosely connected, and can slide past one another; some molecules may get enough energy to escape into a gas. In gases, the atoms or molecules have still more energy and are free of one another except during occasional collisions.

#### **Related Research**

- In a study by Barker (2004), many students ages 8–17 thought that the bubbles seen in boiling water are made of heat, air, oxygen, or hydrogen. Another conception was a change in state model that involved molecules breaking up on boiling and reforming on condensing. Barker also discovered that students find it hard to appreciate the reversibility of phase changes, thinking of each process as a separate event.
- Students' understanding of boiling precedes their understanding of evaporation from surfaces such as dishes and roads. In a sample of students ages 6–8, 70% understood that when water boils vapor comes from it and that the vapor is made of water. However, the same students did not recognize that when a wet surface dries, the water turns to water vapor (Driver et al. 1994).

### Suggestions for Instruction and Assessment

• Use the phenomenon of bubbles to explain what happens to water molecules during a change in state from boiling liquid to gas.

- Encourage students to draw the stages of what they think is happening to the water as it is heated. Continue drawing right up to the stage where bubbles are formed and rising to the top and bursting. Carefully note how students get to the bubble stage—do the bubbles appear spontaneously in their drawings, or does the act of drawing help them make sense of what is happening to the water to form bubbles?
- Students may have trouble accepting that water vapor is in the bubbles if they do not understand the idea that water vapor is invisible. Help students contrast the concept of invisible water vapor with visible water in the air such as clouds and fog, which are made of tiny suspended droplets rather than water molecules spread far apart.
- Ask students to observe and describe what happens to the water level as the water boils. Encourage them to explain where the water went. How was it able to leave the glass container? Probe students to consider how the bubbles were involved in decreasing the water level. Challenge students who had the idea that the bubbles were air or nothing to explain how their model could account for the decreased water level.
- Consider how to present phase changes as reversible. Allow students to see heating and cooling cycles for themselves, so they can realize that phase changes do not result in a new substance being formed. This cycle may help them see that the water escapes as a gas in the bubbles and can be recovered again through cooling.



- By upper elementary grades, students should begin using terminology such as *water vapor*. Using the correct terminology and developing an understanding that water is in the air may help them overcome the idea that water changes into air rather than remaining the same substance but in a form that you cannot see.
- Be cautious when using the term steam with students to describe the gas or vapor form of water. What students are actually seeing over the boiling water when they refer to steam is a wispy mist-it is visible because it is water in a gaseous state that also contains tiny water droplets. Those tiny droplets scatter light at their surfaces, allowing us to "see" the "steam" in much the same way that we can see fog or clouds. The common use of the word steam is different from the way scientists or engineers use the word steam. To them, steam and vapor are both invisible forms of water in the gaseous state. However, when students (and often teachers) use the word steam in the context of this probe, they are usually calling the visible substance that forms above the boiling water a gas. Technically this common use of the word steam is incorrect since a gas is invisible. The Standards use the term vapor (not steam) to describe the invisible, gaseous form of water and explicitly point out that clouds and fog are made up of tiny droplets of water in order to distinguish forms of water in the air that we can see from forms we cannot see. Older students may be introduced to the scientific use of the word

*steam* and compare it to how it is commonly used in our everyday language, once they have grasped the idea that substances in the gaseous state are not visible.

#### **Related NSTA Science Store Publications and NSTA Journal Articles**

See articles and publications listed on page 58.

#### **Related Curriculum Topic Study Guides**

(Keeley 2005) "Physical Properties and Change" "States of Matter"

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## Index

acclimatization, 147 adaptation, 92, 143-48 addition strategy, and temperature, 87 Agan, L., 178, 181 aggregates, of minerals, 158 air, and "Giant Sequoia Tree" probe, 124. See also gases and gas phase allele, 134 American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), x Anderson, C., 105, 110 animals "Baby Mice" probe, 129-35 concept matrix for probes, 92 "Habitat Change" probe, 143–48 "Whale and Shrew" probe, 137-42 anthropomorphic analogies, for chemical bonds, 74-75 assessment-centered environment, 5 astronomy concept matrix for probes, 150 "Darkness at Night" probe, 171-75 "Emmy's Moon and Stars" probe, 177-82 "Objects in the Sky" probe, 185-89 atoms "Chemical Bonds" probe, 71-75 "Comparing Cubes" probe, 19-24 concept matrix for probes, 18 "What's in the Bubbles?" probe, 65–70 auxins, 108, 109 averaging strategy, and temperature, 87 "Baby Mice" probe, 7, 92, 129-35 bacteria, 94 ball-and-stick model, of molecule, 73, 75 Barker, M., 126 Barker, V., 69 Baxter, J., 174, 188 behavioral response concept matrix for probes, 92 "Habitat Change" probe, 143-48 "Plants in the Dark and Light" probe, 107-11 Benchmarks for Science Literacy (AAAS 1993). See also specific probes research on formative assessment and, x teacher notes and, 11-13 biogeochemical cycles, 160 biological classification, 92, 93-99 biology. See life science boiling point "Boiling Time and Temperature" probe, 53-58 "Comparing Cubes" probe, 24 concept matrix for probes, 18 "Turning the Dial" probe, 47-52 "What's in the Bubbles?" probe, 65-70 "Boiling Time and Temperature" probe, 7, 18, 22, 53-58, 61.68 boulder, 152, 154-55 Bryant, R. J., 134-35

buoyancy concept matrix for probes, 18 "Floating High and Low" probe, 33-39 "Floating Logs" probe, 27-32 "Solids and Holes" probe, 45 Butts, B., 74 carbon dioxide, and "Giant Sequoia Tree" probe, 121-27 card sort, 96, 104 Carey, S., 23 Carr, M., 126 cell(s) and cell division, 92, 94, 137-142 Champagne, Audrey, ix change in state "Boiling Time and Temperature" probe, 53-58 concept matrix for probes, 18 "Turning the Dial" probe, 47-52 "What's in the Bubbles?" probe, 65-70 characteristic properties. See properties of matter chemical bonds, and "Chemical Bonds" probe, 18, 71-75 "Chemical Bonds" probe, 71-75 chemical systems, plants as, 126 chemistry. See physical science chlorophyll, 115, 116, 122 chromosomes, 92, 129-35 classification. See biological classification clay, 154-55 coal, 158 community-centered environment, 5 "Comparing Cubes" probe, 2, 18, 19-24, 29-30, 36, 44 concept maps, and "Is It a Plant?" probe, 98 concept matrices, for probes astronomy, 150 earth science, 150 explanation of, 15 life science, 92 physical science, 18 conceptual change model (CCM), 3 conduction concept matrix for probes, 18 "Ice-Cold Lemonade" probe, 77-82 "Mixing Water" probe, 83-89 coral, 159 Cosgrove, M., 63 cotyledon, of seed, 102, 103, 105 culture, of ideas, 7-8 Curriculum Topic Study (CTS), 12, 13 "Darkness at Night" probe, 150, 171-75 day/night cycle, 150, 171-75 Deadman, J., 133 density "Comparing Cubes" probe, 19-24 concept matrix for probes, 18 "Floating High and Low" probe, 33-39 "Floating Logs" probe, 27-32 "Solids and Holes" probe, 41-46

vignette on teaching of, 13-15

discourse community, 8 distance, in universe concept matrix for probes, 150 "Emmy's Moon and Stars" probes, 177–82 "Objects in the Sky" probe, 185–89 DNA, and "Baby Mice" probe, 130, 132 dominant traits, 131, 134 Driver, Rosalind, ix, 6, 12, 30, 37, 104, 126 dry ice, 127

Earth's axis concept matrix for probes, 150 "Darkness at Night" probe, 171-75 "Emmy's Moon and Stars" probe, 177-82 "Objects in the Sky" probe, 185-89 Earth science concept matrix for probes, 150 "Is It a Rock?" probes, 151-56, 157-62 "Mountaintop Fossil" probe, 165-70 electrons, 73 elementary school students. See grade levels; specific probes "Emmy's Moon and Stars" probe, 150, 177-82 energy. See also energy transfer "Boiling Time and Temperature" probe, 53-58 concept matrix for probes, 18 "Freezing Ice" probe, 59-64 "Ice-Cold Lemonade" probe, 77-82 "Mixing Water" probe, 83-89 "Turning the Dial" probe, 47–52 "What's in the Bubbles?" probe, 65–70 energy transfer concept matrix for probes, 18 "Ice-Cold Lemonade" probe, 77-82 "Mixing Water" probe, 83-89 Engel Clough, E., 133 environmental change, and "Habitat Change" probe, 143-48 Erickson, G., 133 erosion. See weathering and erosion evaporation, and "What's in the Bubbles?" probe, 69 evolution, 145, 147. See also adaptation extensive properties of matter, 18, 19-24

floating and sinking. *See* sinking and floating "Floating High and Low" probe, 18, 33–39, 44 "Floating Logs" probe, 6, 14–15, 18, 22, 27–32, 36, 44 food, 92, 113–19 formative assessment, recent research and discoveries, ix–xi. *See also* probes fossils, 150, 165–70 "Freezing Ice" probe, 18, 22, 59–64 freezing point, 18, 59–64 Freyberg, Peter, ix, 154 fungi, 94

Gandolfi, E., 45 gases and gas phase, and "What's in the Bubbles?" probe, 65–70. *See also* carbon dioxide genes and genetics, 92, 129–35 geology. *See* Earth science germination, 92, 101–106 "Giant Sequoia Tree" probe, 92, 121–27 grade levels, and use of probes, 2, 10–11. *See also* elementary students; high school students; middle school students granite, 158, 162 gravel, 152, 154–55 Grimillini, T., 45 growth concept matrix for probes, 92 "Plants in the Dark and Light" probe, 107-11 "Whale and Shrew" probe, 137–42 Guesne, Edith, ix "Habitat Change" probe, 92, 143-48 Hackling, M., 133 Happs, J., 154, 161, 168 Harlen, Wynne, ix heat "Boiling Time and Temperature" probe, 53-58 concept matrix for probes, 18 "Ice-Cold Lemonade" probe, 77-82 "Mixing Water" probe, 83-89 "Turning the Dial" probe, 47-52 heredity. See genes and genetics; inherited traits high school students. See grade levels; specific probes Hobbs, E., 133 How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 1999), x, 4-5 How Students Learn: Science in the Classroom (Donovan and Bransford 2005), x "Ice-Cold Lemonade" probe, 18, 77-82 inherited traits, 92, 129-35 inquiry-based investigation "Boiling Time and Temperature" probe, 57 "Floating High and Low" probe, 38 "Freezing Ice" probe, 63 "Mixing Water" probe, 88 "Needs of Seeds" probe, 105 "Plants in the Dark and Light" probe, 110 "Solids and Holes" probe, 45 "Turning the Dial" probe, 51 intensive properties of matter "Boiling Time and Temperature" probe, 53-58 "Comparing Cubes" probe, 19-24 concept matrix for probes, 18 "Floating High and Low" probe, 33–39 "Floating Logs" probe, 27-32 "Freezing Ice" probe, 59-64 "Solids and Holes" probe, 41–46 "Turning the Dial" probe, 47-52 "Is It Food for Plants?" probe, 6-7, 92, 113-19 "Is It a Plant?" probe, 11-12, 92, 93-99 "Is It a Rock?" probes, 1-2, 6, 150, 151-56, 157-62 Kargbo, D., 133 Kelly, P., 133 kinetic molecular theory, 67 knowledge-centered environment, 5 Konicek, Dick, x Lamarckian interpretations, 147 landforms, 150, 166-70 Leach, J., 97 learner-centered environment, 5 learning, linking of probes with teaching and, 3-4

life cycles, 92, 101-106 life science "Baby Mice" probe, 129-35 concept matrix for probes, 92 "Giant Sequoia Tree" probe, 121-27 "Habitat Change" probe, 143-48 "Is It Food for Plants?" probe, 113-19 "Is It a Plant?" probe, 93–99 "Needs of Seeds" probe, 101-106 "Plants in the Dark and Light" probe, 107-11 "Whale and Shrew" probe, 137-42 light reflection, 150, 185-89 limestone, 158 liquid phase, and "What's in the Bubbles?" probe, 66-70 Maine Mathematics and Science Alliance, xi Making Sense of Secondary Science: Research Into Children's Ideas (Driver 1994), 12 mass "Comparing Cubes" probe, 19-24 concept matrix for probes, 18 "Floating High and Low" probe, 35, 37, 38 "Floating Logs" probe, 29 "Giant Sequoia Tree" probe, 123 "Solids and Holes" probe, 43 mathematics, 35, 43, 180 McDermott, Lillian, ix melting point "Comparing Cubes" probe, 19-24 concept matrix for probes, 18 freezing point compared to, 64 Mendel, Gregor, and Mendelian genetics, 130, 131 metacognitive approach, and use of probes, 4-5 middle school students. See grade levels; specific probes minerals concept matrix for probes, 150 "Is It a Rock?" probes, 151-56, 157-62 Minstrel, Jim, ix misconceptions, of students about scientific principles, 7 mixed density, 42-43, 45 "Mixing Water" probe, 18, 83-89 molecules. See also atoms; kinetic molecular theory ball-and-stick model of, 73, 75 combinations at level of, 74 Moon, 174, 177-82, 186 "Mountaintop Fossil" probe, 150, 165-70 mud, 159 National Science Education Standards (NRC 1996). See

Benchmarks for Science Literacy (AAAS 1993)
National Science Teachers Association (NSTA), and lists of resources for probes, 10, 13
natural selection, 145. See also evolution
needs of organisms
 concept matrix for probes, 92
 "Needs of Seeds" probe, 101–106
 "Plants in the Dark and Light" probe, 107–11
"Needs of Seeds" probe, 2, 92, 101–106
 neurons, 140
 "no hands questioning," 8
 nutrition and nutrients, and "Is It Food for Plants?" probe,
 114–15

"Objects in the Sky" probe, 150, 185-89 observational experiences, and "Baby Mice" probe, 134 Osborne, Roger, ix, 63 oxygen, 124 paramecium, 141 Pecori Balandi, B., 45 phase change graphs, 51 photosynthesis concept matrix for probes, 92 "Giant Sequoia Tree" probe, 121–27 "Is It Food for Plants?" probe, 113–19 "Is It a Plant?" probe, 93 physical science "Boiling Time and Temperature" probe, 53-58 "Chemical Bonds" probe, 71–75 "Comparing Cubes" probe, 19–24 concept matrix for probes, 18 "Floating High and Low" probe, 33–39 "Floating Logs" probe, 27-32 "Freezing Ice" probe, 59-64 "Ice-Cold Lemonade" probe, 77-82 "Mixing Water" probe, 83-89 "Solids and Holes" probe, 41-46 "Turning the Dial" probe, 47-52 "What's in the Bubbles?" probe, 65-70 planets. See Earth's axis; rotation; solar system plants concept matrix for probes, 92 "Giant Sequoia Tree" probe, 121–27 "Is It Food for Plants?" probe, 113-19 "Is It a Plant?" probe, 93-99 "Needs of Seeds" probe, 101-106 "Plants in the Dark and Light" probe, 107-11 "Plants in the Dark and Light" probe, 92, 107-11 plate tectonics, 167 predictions, and "Freezing Ice" probe, 63 Private Universe Project (Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics 1995), x, 124, 126 probes. See also formative assessment; specific probes; specific scientific principles concept matrices and, 15 embedding of in instruction, 7-9 examples of concept, 1-3 linking of teaching, learning, and, 3-4 research supporting use of, 4-5 taking account of students' ideas, 5-7 teacher notes on, 9-13 properties of matter "Boiling Time and Temperature" probe, 53-58 "Comparing Cubes" probe, 19-24 concept matrix for probes, 18 "Floating High and Low" probe, 33–39 "Floating Logs" probe, 27-32 "Freezing Ice" probe, 59-64 "Solids and Holes" probe, 41-46 "Turning the Dial" probe, 47-52 Prosner, G., 3 Proxima Centauri (star), 179 pumice, 158 Punnett squares, 134-35 pure substance, 56

recessive traits, 131, 134

reflection, encouraging of continuous, 9 revolution, and planetary rotation, 175 Robertson, Bill, 13 rock cycle, 153, 169 rock dust, 155 rocks concept matrix for probes, 150 "Is It a Rock?" probes, 151-56, 157-62 rotation, planetary, 150, 171-75 Roth, K., 105, 110 Russell, T., 105 Ryman, D., 97-98 Sadler, Philip, x, 174 sand, 152, 154-55 scale models, 179, 182 Schneps, Matthew, x Science Curriculum Topic Study: Bridging the Gap Between Standards and Practice (Keeley 2005), xi, 13 Science Formative Assessment: 75 Practical Strategies for Linking Assessment, Instruction, and Learning (Keeley, Forthcoming), 9 Science Store (NTSA), and additional materials for probes. See specific probes SciLinks, and websites, 11, 21, 29, 36, 43, 49, 55, 61, 67, 73, 87, 95, 103, 109, 115, 123, 131, 139, 145, 153, 159, 167, 173, 179, 187 sedimentary rock, 167, 168 seeds, 92, 101-106 sensory reasoning, 23 Shapiro, Bonnie, ix single-celled organisms, 141 sinking and floating "Comparing Cubes" probe, 19-24 concept matrix for probes, 18 "Floating High and Low" probe, 33-39 "Floating Logs" probe, 27-32 "Solids and Holes" probe, 41–46 size of atoms, 23 of cells, 137-42 of universe, 150, 177-82, 185-89 Smith, C., 23 Smith, E., 105, 110 Smith, R., 74 solar system "Emmy's Moon and Stars" probe, 177-82 "Objects in the Sky" probe, 185-89 "Solids and Holes" probe, 18, 22, 29-30, 36, 41-46 space science. See astronomy stars concept matrix for probes, 150 "Emmy's Moon and Stars" probe, 177-82 "Objects in the Sky" probe, 185–89 station approach, and "Floating High and Low" probe, 38 Stavy, R., 140-41 Stead, B., 98 Stop Faking It! Finally Understanding Science So You Can Teach It series (Robertson), 10, 13 students, ideas of and use of probes, 5-7. See also elementary students; high school students; learning; middle school students; teaching

subtraction strategy, and temperature, 87 surface area-to-volume ratio, 139, 141 Tamir, P., 117 taxonomy. See biological classification teacher notes, on use of probes, 9-13 teaching. See also card sort; inquiry-based investigation; observational experiences; station approach; students embedding of probes in instruction, 7-9 linking of probes with learning and, 3-4 vignette on topic of density, 13-15 telescopes, 182, 189 temperature "Boiling Time and Temperature" probe, 53–58 concept matrix for probes, 18 "Freezing Ice" probe, 59-64 "Mixing Water" probe, 83-89 "Turning the Dial" probe, 47-52 terminology. See also biological classification astronomy, 173, 175 Earth science, 152 life science, 116, 118, 124, 132, 134 physical science, 29, 35, 38, 70 thermal energy, 78, 85 "think-pair-share" strategy, 8 Tiberghien, Andrée, ix time, geologic, 162, 166, 167 time-temperature graph, 57, 58 Tirosh, D., 140-41 transformation of matter, 92, 121-27 Treagust, D., 133 "Turning the Dial" probe, 18, 22, 47-52, 56, 61, 68 United Kingdom, and research on formative assessment, x universe concept matrix for probes, 150 size of, 150, 177-82, 185-89 uplift, geologic, 150, 166-70 vocabulary. See terminology volume "Comparing Cubes" probe, 20, 24 "Floating High and Low" probe, 35, 38 "Floating Logs" probe, 29 ratio of surface area to, 139, 141 "Solids and Holes" probe, 43, 45 Wandersee, J., 110, 117, 126 water vapor, 70 Watt, D., 105 weathering and erosion, 150, 165-70 websites, 12, 13. See also SciLinks weight "Comparing Cubes" probe, 19–24 concept matrix for probes, 18concepts of density and mass, 37 "Giant Sequoia Tree" probe, 123 "Whale and Shrew" probe, 92, 137–42 "What's in the Bubbles?" probe, 2, 18, 56, 65-70 Wiser, M., 23 Wood-Robinson, C., 133