



Assessment For Learning



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If you wish to comment or write an article or notice, based on one of the themes, for submission (300 to 600 words max.) for consideration in an upcoming *Trillium*, contact:

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An Essential Practice in Lifelong Learning

By Deanna Perry

Traditionally, assessment and evaluation have been viewed as separate from instruction. Assessments typically occurred after instruction to provide a numerical or letter grade for reporting purposes. Assessment was often geared to evaluating what students had learned. The current student success initiative, drawing upon extensive educational research, is forcing a culture shift among all of the stakeholders in our education system, bringing assessment to the forefront as an essential tool in teaching students to learn. Assessment *for* learning requires that teachers:

- Understand and articulate the expectations that students are to achieve, in advance of instruction and in language that students understand;
- Be assessment literate, understanding the purpose of each assessment, and to teach students how to become assessment literate;
- Demonstrate to students through frequent and descriptive feedback how to take control of their own learning, how to recognize areas of challenge and how to make adjustments in the learning process to respond to the challenges;
- Actively engage students in their own assessment to enable a deeper understanding of the learning process.

The ASCD position (adopted in 1998) related to Assessment: Uses and Misuses states that: Assessment is valuable when educators use it to guide programs, determine instruction, influence resource allocations, and authentically make judgements about student learning. The primary stakeholders in education, particularly students and teachers, must recognize the very critical role that assessment plays in the development of the lifelong learner, in closing the achievement gap and in ensuring the success of all students.

Further reading:

Chappuis, Stephen et al. (2005). *Assessment FOR Learning*. Portland, Oregon: Assessment Training Institute.

Cooper, Damian (2006). *Talk About Assessment: Strategies and Tools to Improve Learning*, Toronto: Thomson Nelson.

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ASCD in Action



ASCD Networks

Assessment for Learning Network

The Assessment for Learning network allows members to share philosophy, visions, and strategies for developing and implementing effective and balanced classroom and school system assessment programs. This network communicates with members through a newsletter to share information and resources regarding the critical role of assessment in the learning process.

Network Facilitator

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Brain-Compatible Learning

This network promotes awareness and understanding of how brain research translates into practice. The network shares information on brain-compatible education through conferences, workshops and newsletters. This network is located at <http://braincompatible.ascd.org>.

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To Learn More About ASCD's Other Networks, Visit:
<http://www.ascd.org/aboutascd/cr/networks/network.html>

Change is a Three Letter Word

By Jaimie Perry, Principal
St. Joseph High School, Renfrew

As a high school principal, I have told many an audience that typically students who fail a course are those who have failed to hand in a piece of work or several pieces of work for evaluation. And, as high school teacher, I was always able to say what work had been completed or not completed for evaluation.

There you have it: I am an admitted expert in "assessment of learning" not "for learning". As the June issue of the *Trillium* pointed out, the exchange of those prepositions is crucial if we are to make an educational "Breakthrough", to use Michael Fullan's term. In other words, as a teacher I was always comfortable saying what product had or had not been submitted. Ask me about *how* my students were learning and how I would know on a day-to-day basis, and to be honest, I would be less sure.

Recently, this observation resonated even more deeply as a result of my first grade one parent-teacher interview with my daughter's teacher. It was clear to me that her teacher had a firm grasp on *how* students were learning. The "product" in grade one is to do, among other things, read, compute, and write. Students must demonstrate

their learning through many tasks. It is very evident that when the pupil is not able to do those tasks, there is a myriad of responses from the teacher.

In his recent book, *Breakthrough*, Michael Fullan talks about using in-class feedback from pupils for "precision" and "personalized" instruction. As a high school principal, I must admit I have not quite yet grasped the full practical implications of his terms, which really speak to "assessment for learning". But, my daughter's grade one teacher may have provided insight into the development of an answer!

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Habits of Mind: A Key Dimension to Assess FOR Learning

By John Myers, Curriculum Instructor, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto
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One approach to formative assessment to help students see how they are doing and determine what they need to do to improve (assessment FOR learning) is through identifying sound habits of mind. These represent “intelligent behaviours” and serve as a repertoire of mindful strategies we use when faced with problems or decisions. A simple example occurs when a child takes care to look left, then right, then left again for oncoming traffic before crossing the street.

These behaviours are more than skills, as they are internalized and used by successful learners almost automatically. They come into play when you a point in the learning when you are unsure as to what to do next. Among the two dozen or more habits identified in the resources cited below are important ones such as:

- **PERSEVERANCE**- Do students give up or back up and use a different strategy if the first one did not work?
- **FLEXIBLE THINKING**- Do students use the same approaches for different problems or do they use and weigh the merits of alternative strategies, consider the approaches of others, and deal with more than one classification system simultaneously?
- **USE OF PAST KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCES**- Do students approach each learning experience as though it were unique or do they apply past experiences to present circumstances through analogies or references to previous experiences?
- **OPEN-MINDEDNESS**- Are students willing to consider evidence opposing their view and to revise their view should the evidence warrant it?

These represent “intelligent behaviours” and serve as a repertoire of mindful strategies when faced with problems or decisions.

There are two important bonuses when you explore and use these habits. Some of them correspond to the learning skills section of the provincial report card and to the developing “learner profiles” used in such programs as diverse as those for learners at risk and the International Baccalaureate.

Other identified habits will help you distinguish between critical and creative thinking: an important component of the provincial achievement chart but not clearly defined there.

Good habits are hard to break and lead to success for all!

See:

- <http://www.habits-of-mind.net/> for the work by Costa and Kallick and the best introduction to the habits;
- <http://www.mcrel.org/programs/dimensions/whathow.asp> for habits described by the Dimensions of Learning framework from Marzano and his colleagues;
- <http://public.sd38.bc.ca/RTRWeb/CriticalThinkingPage> from the work on critical thinking by Case and Daniels in Canada.

Planning for Assessment Success

By: Hélène Coulombe, Educational Program Consultant,
Ottawa– Carleton Catholic School Board

Changes in assessment and evaluation practices over the last decade have forced educators to reflect critically on their practice. It has been stressful and sometimes mystifying. Set your students up for success and reduce stress for you by taking a proactive look at ‘planning for assessment success’. The answers lie in planning with the end in mind. Have a look at the tips in the OASCD website that incorporate the fundamental principles of assessment and evaluation and the stages of planning.

To view this whole article visit:

<http://www.ascd.ca/ascd/on/pages/newsletter.php>

THE BIG IDEAS OF ASSESSMENT

By Damian Cooper

The following Big Ideas can help teachers balance the need to collect a valid sample of achievement evidence for reporting purposes with the need to provide students with feedback to help them learn.

Big Idea 1— *Assessment serves different purposes at different times: it may be used to find out what students already know and can do; it may be used to help students improve their learning; or it may be used to let students and their parents know how much they have learned within a prescribed period of time.* Assessment has two over-riding functions: to inform instruction and to communicate information about achievement. The first function includes **diagnostic assessment**, which enables the teacher to ascertain what students currently know and can do, as well as **formative assessment**, which provides students with feedback to help them improve their learning. The second function informs students and their parents how well they have learned. This involves judging the quality of student work and using letter grades, scores, or achievement levels to describe that quality.

Big Idea 2— *Assessment must be planned and purposeful.* In the past, program and lesson plans identified teaching objectives, instructional approaches, and resources, but offered little in terms of assessment strategies and tools to judge the quality of student work. Times have changed, though, and outcomes-based learning and **backward design** have clarified the questions that must be posed before teaching begins:

1. What do I expect students to know and be able to do at the end of this unit, term, or year? (**curriculum question**)
2. How will I determine whether they have learned these things? (**assessment question**)
3. What series of lessons will be most effective in enabling students to demonstrate they have learned these things? (**instruction question**)

Big Idea 3— *Assessment must be balanced, including oral, performance, and written tasks, and be flexible in order to improve learning for all students.* Provincial and locally developed curriculum documents include a broad range of learning outcomes. These outcomes, or learning targets, prescribe knowledge and understanding, skills, and attitudes or dispositions.

To adequately assess whether students have acquired these learning targets, a broad range of assessment strategies must be used. This means that some of the assessments you select or design will require students to perform or demonstrate their skills; some will require students to speak and present; and others will

require students to write about what they know and understand. Balanced assessment plans contain all three kinds of tasks—what *Talk About Assessment* refers to as *write, do, and say* tasks. To adequately assess whether students have acquired these learning targets, a broad range of assessment strategies must be used. This means that some of the assessments you select or design will require students to perform or demonstrate their skills; some will require students to speak and present; and others will require students to write about what they know and understand. Balanced assessment plans contain all three kinds of tasks—what *Talk About Assessment* refers to as *write, do, and say* tasks.

Flexibility is also essential in assessment because you may need to adapt or modify your planned assessment approach for some students. For example, some may require an alternative approach to compensate for a particular exceptionality. Others may just be learning English or French, so a flexible approach will be necessary to prevent a language bias from interfering with the assessment information you gather. Flexibility could also take the form of an extended deadline for a student experiencing extenuating circumstances at home.

Flexibility does not mean having no clear expectations. Effective teachers provide their students with clear, succinct guidelines about assessment. Flexibility is reflected in the professional judgement that such teachers demonstrate when applying these guidelines to an individual student, a group of students, or sometimes to the whole class when a specific situation demands it.

Big Idea 4— *Assessment and instruction are inseparable because effective assessment informs learning.* Effective teachers are constantly assessing their students' learning in informal ways by **listening, observing, and conferencing** with them, and then using the information they gather to adjust instruction to maximize learning. When more formal assessment has occurred, such as a major project or a test, effective teachers carefully analyze the results and adjust subsequent instruction to address the learning gaps.

Big Idea 5— *For assessment to be helpful to students, it must inform them in words, not numerical scores or letter grades, what they have done well, what they have less well, and what they need to do next in order to improve.* Marks, scores, and letter grades alone do not provide students with the information they need to improve their work. They are merely symbols that represent degrees of quality. Too often, however, these symbols become the sole focus of assessment. Assessment information that

Assessment is not something that teachers do to students; it is a collaborative process involving students, teachers, and parents.

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improves students' learning provides clear and specific direction about what to do differently in order to improve the quality of their work.

Big Idea 6—*Assessment is a collaborative process that is most effective when it involves self, peer, and teacher assessment.* Assessment is not something that teachers do to students; it is a collaborative process involving students, teachers, and parents. Everyone has a role to play if the quality of students' learning is to improve. Assessment strategies such as student work portfolios and three-way conferencing are highly effective because they maximize the potential for collaboration, and help students plan for future learning.

Big Idea 7—*Performance standards are an essential component of effective assessment.* Whether assessment is being used to further student learning or describe the quality of polished work, teachers, students, and parents need to know the standards being used to identify quality work. During the past decade, most provinces have moved away from **norm-referenced standards**, by which student work was judged against how other students performed. Instead, **criterion-referenced standards** are being used. For each assessment, a set of pre-determined **performance criteria** are identified and student achievement is measured against those criteria. The use of **rubrics** and student **exemplars** are indicative of jurisdictions where criterion-referenced standards are in place.

Big Idea 8—*Grading and reporting student achievement is a caring, sensitive process that requires teachers' professional judgement.* Someone once said that any teacher who could be replaced by a computer ought to be! But we all know that effective teachers will never be replaced by computers because one of the essential characteristics of the teaching-learning process is the human interaction that occurs between students and a caring, sensitive, skilled teacher. That same care and sensitivity, and skill must come into play when teachers determine report card grades. The summary of learning that appears on a report card should not come as a surprise to the student, teacher, or parents. It should simply confirm the trend in achievement that a student has demonstrated over time. Surprises tend only to occur when the trend in a student's achievement is over-ridden by faulty methods used to compute a final grade.

These Big Ideas are the foundation for *Talk About Assessment*, published by Thomson Nelson. This practical, easy-to-use guide to classroom assessment includes a DVD of best practice, as well as a CD-ROM containing dozens of modifiable assessment tools.

Damian Cooper

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Where do Grades Fit in Assessment for Learning?

By Michele Litster, Secondary Curriculum Consultant,
Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board

To create a culture of Assessment for Learning, we need to revisit our understanding and use of grades. We need to break old habits of grading everything we want students to perceive as important and valuable, and start communicating with them instead.

For assessment to lead to further learning, the learner must receive information he or she can use to improve. 62% is a rating or a judgement which is not particularly informative. When a grade accompanied by a clear explanation of what it means, further learning is promoted. If information regarding the strengths and areas for improvement is provided, is it really necessary to present the grade at all?

Though a grade doesn't communicate much information, it does have an emotional impact that can affect students' willingness to keep on learning. If the grade is "bad", is the student inclined to give up? If the grade is "good", is the student inclined to figure it's good enough? Neither of these attitudes encourages further learning.

Grades should be reserved for the times when we need to report summary statements of achievement; they are the language of evaluation and should be used sparingly.

Reference

Kohn, A. (1999). From grading to de-grading. *High School Magazine*, 6(5), 2-13.

To view this whole article visit:

<http://www.ascd.ca/ascd/on/pages/newsletter.php>

Ontario ASCD President's Message

by Ivan Saari, President

My undergrad years introduced me to, amongst other things, a concept called "Just Noticeable Difference." Often referred to as Weber's Law, the important point was the recognition of a "threshold of consciousness". This is the point at which an experience stands out from the everyday flow of experience." (Mal Irwin, "Weightlifting Makes The Difference") As I progressed in my career in education, my reading of Vygotsky's work recalled this concept that learning will occur when a experience is different enough from previous ones to stand out and thus be memorized.

Lately, many of my multiple conversations with: teachers applying their professional judgment, with parents concerned about passing/failing students, students applying for scholarships/ bursaries and with policy makers attempting to support change in formative assessment and summative evaluation, have again brought me back to this concept. Threshold values that determine the difference between a pass or a fail, an A or a B, or even the development of best practice, are significant to the practitioner. At some critical point, we must make the determination whether or not a student has demonstrated significant knowledge to justify a certain grade, or a school has made significant progress to allow for achievement of goals in their action plan, or the education system has served students well enough to be considered a success by all stakeholders.

The theme of this issue of *Trillium* is "Assessment For Learning." As you reflect on your practice, regardless of your educational role, you must ask yourself if you are making a "noticeable difference". At what point does your answer reflect "yes"? At what point would others answer "yes"? What threshold must you surpass to be making a significant difference?

If your role involves evaluating students, when does "limited" become "some" or "considerable" become "thorough"? The answer is based on perception, judgment, and experience. The *Trillium* editors have assembled another thought-provoking newsletter, one that I trust will stimulate your perception, improve your judgment, and lead you to increased experience. We need to make a "noticeable difference" and meet the thresholds imposed on us by trusting parents and ready students.

President Ivan Saari recognized as one of ASCD's 2006-2007 Emerging Leaders

Ivan Saari's interest in distributed leadership and advocacy drew him to ASCD. As President of the Ontario ASCD, he works to incorporate the influence aspects of ASCD's Leadership for Effective Advocacy and Practice Institute into daily practice. He believes that better understanding the policymaking process makes him more persuasive.

- ASCD Education Update November 2006

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