



ILLUSTRATION: DAVE DONALD

Co-Constructing Success Criteria

Assessment in the service of learning

by Anne Davies and Sandra Herbst

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Anne Davies, PhD, applies her expert knowledge of quality classroom assessment practices toward her mission to “increase the possibility of learning for all our students.” Educators and leaders in Canada, the U.S., and other countries have benefited from her many publications, along with the support she provides during professional development events and multi-year projects.

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RESEARCH IN THE AREA of assessment for learning – formative assessment plus the deep involvement of students in the assessment process – is not only broad and deep, it is also overwhelmingly positive in terms of its impact on student learning and achievement.¹

When teachers use classroom assessment in support of learning, they find out what students know, are able to do, and can articulate. As they consider that evidence in relation to curricular standards and expectations, they plan learning experiences to help students close the gap. Going one step further by involving students in assessment increases their learning.

Assessment for learning is what teachers do *during* the learning. Teachers involve students in assessment by sharing clear learning destinations, using samples to help students understand quality and development, and involving students in co-constructing criteria and in self and peer assessment. They also involve students in collecting evidence of learning and communicating evidence of that learning to others.

Assessment for learning also contributes to engagement and ownership; it supports students to learn to be self-regulating – that is, to self-monitor their way to success. And yet, in spite of the power of assessment for learning, there continues to be discourse at all levels about whether or not quality classroom assessment – especially assessment for learning – can be successfully implemented. Much work has been done and successes documented classroom by classroom,² yet wide-scale successful implementation has not been achieved. Why might this be?

We have heard educators say that in order to achieve quality classroom assessment, various things would have to change: class sizes would need to be smaller, traditional report cards would need to be abolished, curricular expectations would have to be reduced, popular opinion would need to shift. At times, these barriers seem insurmountable. And yet, across this country and elsewhere, quality classroom assessment is firmly in place, even in the most difficult and challenging teaching and learning environments. We believe we are on our way to what Malcolm Gladwell would call “the tipping point.” The current situation in Canada is captured by these words: “At first they said it couldn’t be done, but some were doing it. Then

they said it could only be done by a special few, but more were doing it. And then they said, ‘Why would you do it any other way?’”³

Over the past 20 years in our work with schools and systems in Canada, the U.S., New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, and elsewhere, we have often demonstrated the process of engaging learners in assessment. This, along with teacher accounts and classroom footage of diverse students of all ages using assessment in the service of learning, helps others understand “the spirit as well as the letter” of assessment for learning in action. The following accounts are examples of this work from a primary classroom, a secondary mathematics course, and the adult learner perspective.

Grade 2: what makes good writing?

It was early October and a class of Grade 2 students were ready to explore what counted in a great piece of writing. Along with their teacher, Sandy, we looked for samples of student writing that would illustrate excellence at this level. We wrote the samples on large pieces of chart paper and began by putting one up on the board and reading it through to the students. We did not ask what the writing was about. Instead we asked, “What makes this a good piece of Grade 2 writing for this time of the year?”

We asked students to talk with a partner and write down one thought. We walked around and listened and when we heard a pair state, “The kid used interesting words,” we invited the class to listen to what their friends were saying. We wrote that idea onto a large strip of paper. We continued to eavesdrop on the conversations until we heard, “We can read the story because it is neat.” Again, the class stopped to hear this idea and we wrote that second idea on another strip of paper. We could now both see and hear that many of the students understood that what we were asking them to think and talk about was from the “balcony view.”

After sharing two other samples, we had several ideas written on strips of paper; they were generated mostly from the students, though a few had been suggested by Sandy. Students were now given a strip of paper with a single response to that initial question. They read their strip over and over to themselves and then took a partner to the samples, which had been placed on the classroom

EN BREF

De vastes recherches portant sur *l'évaluation pour l'apprentissage* effectuée en classe – contexte dans lequel les élèves sont très engagés dans le processus de l'évaluation formative – démontrent des résultats nettement positifs sur le plan de son impact sur l'apprentissage et la réussite des élèves.

Qu'il s'agisse de la deuxième année, de la dernière année du secondaire ou d'un groupe d'éducateurs, nous savons que lorsque nous mettons l'évaluation au service de l'apprentissage, nous transmettons aux apprenants une image de qualité. Nous bâtissons ensemble un langage commun d'évaluation. Les apprenants peuvent ensuite s'auto-encadrer en vue de réussir. Au lieu de dire aux apprenants ce qui est important ou ce qui « devrait » se passer, nous avons appris qu'une évaluation de qualité en classe qui soutient l'apprentissage se produit lorsque les élèves, le personnel enseignant, la direction d'école et les dirigeants scolaires se consacrent tous activement à utiliser l'évaluation pour appuyer leurs propres apprentissages – et les apprentissages de leur entourage.

floor. Their job was to show their partner where the idea that was on their strip of paper was evidenced in one of the three samples. We stood close by, to support and encourage. Students traded strips of paper and we repeated this step several times.

It was now time to sort their ideas. We placed all of the strips on the floor and as adults, we found two strips that we thought could be grouped together and put them on the floor at the back of the classroom. We found another two strips that we thought were similar and put them on the floor at the front of the classroom. We did that one more time and placed those two strips underneath the window. However, there were several more strips left and so we modeled what would happen next. We picked up one of the remaining strips and we walked from group to group to group, discussing whether it belonged here or here or here. Once we had made a decision, we placed it with that group and invited the students to do the same with a partner of their choice. The movement, talking, and negotiation provided evidence that the students were engaged and thinking in order to work things out.

Once we had all of the strips placed in one of the three groups, we talked about what would be a good “title” or criterion for each of the groups. Here is what those grade two students came up with:

- Others can read my writing.
- My writing is interesting to others.
- My writing follows the rules of writing.

To finish the lesson, another sample – this time written on a sheet of paper – was given to each student. With a partner, the task was to find one example in that final sample that corresponded to a strip that was under each of the three categories. They needed to underline evidence of that detail from the first group with a green crayon, the second with an orange crayon, and the third with a blue crayon. The students were analyzing, comparing, and contrasting in order to further construct their understanding of what constitutes good writing.

This process of co-constructing criteria, that is uncovering together what quality looks like, is one that is being used with all learners, regardless of age or subject matter. And yet, over and over again, we hear that this type of process makes sense only with younger students. So let's take a look at an account from secondary school.

Grade 12: pre-calculus

A cluster of outcomes in the Grade 12 pre-calculus curriculum deals with students' ability to make connections between the concepts studied, other mathematics and the “real world.” This is an area of

learning that is typically included in the provincial examination at the end of the semester.

Marty, a high school Mathematics teacher, had noticed that his students were consistently struggling to demonstrate proficiency in this particular area. It was at this time that we were invited into the school to do demonstration lessons. Our work was to highlight several processes that involve students in their own assessment and build their capacity to “figure out” what is expected of them.⁴

Marty shared with me five anonymous examples of student work that demonstrated a high level of quality. The students had done some initial work in this area, but not much instructional time had yet been devoted to a deep understanding of these concepts.

With a partner, students looked at two samples. They knew that their teacher considered these samples to be thorough and complete. Their task was to respond to this question: What is important when we are reflecting and making connections? As we circulated and talked with the students, we realized that they had not listed many ideas.

We, therefore, gave them another two samples. Now they had four examples in which to find common aspects that could help them respond to the question. Many ideas were written down; their lists were getting longer and longer.

In groups of six, students examined their lists and discarded duplicate responses. The ones that remained were written on large strips of paper – one idea per strip. Desks were pushed aside and the 30-plus strips were placed on the floor. Marty reviewed all the strips and added additional ideas that were not yet represented. In truth, he contributed only a few. We were now ready to sort.

We selected two strips that were similar and placed them on the floor in one corner of the room, and repeated this two more times to make three distinct groups. Now the students, working in pairs, sorted the strips into the three groups.

We then divided the class into three large groups. Each group looked through one of the piles of strips and identified a “title” or a “big idea” to best represent the concept that was held in common across all the ideas. This categorization helped us to name the criteria. And so we now had three criteria to answer the original question, “What is important when we are reflecting and making connections?”:

- My response lets others into my thinking.
- My response is organized and can be understood by others.
- My response shows how different topics and areas are linked.

There was one last sample that had been held back and was now shared with students. As they looked through that sample with their partner, their task was to assess it. The students were asked to indicate where they saw evidence of each of the three criteria; one they underlined, one they circled, and one they placed a box around. As they matched the criteria to this fifth sample, they not only deepened their understanding of what was expected of them, but also practiced what it meant to engage in self or peer assessment in relation to criteria.

From then on, whenever students turned in work related to the criteria they had co-constructed, they marked up their paper. Do not misunderstand: They did not assign a grade to their work or provide themselves with evaluative feedback such as a rubric score. Rather, they provided evidence to the teacher that they had considered and incorporated into their work the evidence that was co-constructed that day. Their markup included the underlines, the circles, and the boxes to match their responses to the criteria – the very criteria that placed what was expected of them into a practical and usable framework. It could be referred to time and time again.

In both of these classes, the process engaged students to “figure it out” and to be partners in the assessment process. The samples helped

them to better understand what was expected of them; co-constructing criteria allowed the students to describe in specific and descriptive terms a high level of quality; matching criteria to additional samples and their own work gave the opportunity to provide feedback. This type of feedback was not a statement of value or judgment, but was explicitly related to the earlier description of quality.

A leadership perspective

Leaders need to understand what quality assessment looks like, what can be done to support teachers, and how to use assessment in the service of learning in their own work as leaders. We have learned that successful implementation of assessment in support of learning occurs when students, teachers, school leaders, and system leaders are *all* involved and *all* engaged in using assessment to support learning - both their own learning and the learning of those around them.⁵

Consider this: Twelve educators formed their own professional learning community to learn more about student engagement. They came to the conversation from across multiple grade levels, disciplines, roles, and schools. They had a sense of what they wanted to learn and talk about, but they were unsure as to how they might get there. We were invited into their circle. After listening to their initial conversations, we posed a question: “So for you, what is important in a professional learning community?”

Much has been written in this regard, but we intended to surface the thinking of each individual, in order to inform the group. Each teacher thought about responses to the question, and using a similar process to the one outlined in the Grade 12 example, we worked to build a deeper sense of understanding and expectation. This time, the teachers wrote their ideas on sticky notes. After only a few minutes, there were well over 40 sticky notes in a pile in the centre of the table. After this initial brainstorming, we looked over the ideas to determine what groups made sense. We sorted according to that thinking and then identified each group, creating the following criteria:

- We have a good time when we learn.
- A clear purpose gives a passion for learning.
- Time for reflective and critical thinking results in practical and meaningful next steps.
- All members’ ideas and opinions are respected, resulting in a high level of trust.

At subsequent meetings, the group used the criteria in one or both of the following ways:

- At the beginning of the session, individual members identified criteria that they wanted to focus on in their actions, gestures, and words. This was a chance to set a goal in an area of personal importance.
- At the end of each session, participants provided evidence from the discussion and activities that the criteria had been met or had not yet been met. For example, participants shared statements that had been used proving that members’ ideas and opinions had been respected.

Again, this process included the hallmarks of practice that engaged learners to be partners in the assessment process:

- In this case there were no samples, but participants had read exten-

sively in the area of professional learning.

- Co-constructing criteria allowed the teachers to describe in specific and descriptive terms what they expected in their professional learning community.
- Participants gave themselves feedback and gave feedback to the group on what went well and what they could work on. They used the criteria to guide the feedback, so that it was not a statement of value or judgment, but was explicitly connected to the criteria that they had established.

Next steps

Ask yourself: Could you do this with your learners? If not, why not? In our work we have co-constructed criteria with trustees, parents, students in graduate programs, and our youngest learners who are four years old.

It is transformative on many levels. It does not require smaller classes. It does not require special circumstances. It does not require extra time - in fact, it increases the amount of time available. A teacher of Grade 12 English who co-constructed criteria with his students said to us, “I am getting work now that I wouldn’t normally get until semester turn-around. This process works. I am saving so much time. You were right. I’m not buried in clerical marking anymore.”

To guide your own next steps, whether you are a classroom teacher or a leader, ask yourself the following three questions:

1. When could I co-construct criteria? In what ways could I use samples to support the understanding of quality and success so the co-constructed criteria are better?
2. In what ways might I involve learners in using the criteria as a guide for their own self and peer assessment or as a way to check for how close they are to approaching quality and success?
3. In what ways could my learners show proof of learning by collecting baseline evidence in relation to the co-constructed criteria and then evidence after there has been time to learn and change?

When we use assessment in the service of learning, we provide our learners with a picture of quality. Together we build a common language of assessment. We can then self-monitor our way to success. Instead of telling learners what is important, what needs to be done or what “should” be happening, students, teachers and school leaders can be *all* involved and *all* engaged in using assessment to support learning. **EC**

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Hattie, 2009; Black and Wiliam, 1998; Harlen and Deakin-Crick, 2002; James, 2006.
- 2 See Nancy Barr, *Primary School Children’s Articulation of the Development of Quality in Writing During the Implementation of Assessment for Learning* (2013), <http://ecommons.usask.ca/xmlui/handle/10388/ETD-2012-12-859>; and A. Davies, K. Busick, and S. Herbst, *Using Assessment for Learning: A practical guide* (Courtenay, B.C.: Building Connections Publishing, 2013).
- 3 Anonymous.
- 4 P. Milton and R. Kennedy, “Intellectual Engagement: A search for practical meaning,” *Education Canada* 51, no. 4 (2011). <http://www.cea-ace.ca/education-canada/article/intellectual-engagement-search-practical-meaning>
- 5 M. James, “Learning How to Learn, in Classrooms, Schools and Networks,” *Research Papers in Education* 21, no. 2 (2006): 101-234; and A. Davies, B. Parrott Reynolds and S. Herbst, *Transforming Schools and Systems Using Assessment*, 2nd Edition (Bloomington, Indiana: Solution Tree Press, 2012).