

June 8, 2007

Monica Pamer, Lead Director, Ministry of Education, contributes the final article in the assessment series focussing this week on assessment in secondary schools. As an ex-secondary mathematics teacher, I look at this approach as particularly promising for improving student learning and success in secondary classrooms.

More on Assessment “For” and “As” Learning

Does it work in secondary schools?

The short answer is a resounding “yes”. The longer answer is a hesitant “maybe but . . .” This week we’ll discuss possible reasons for that hesitation along with looking at formative assessment practices in a secondary school.

For the past few weeks we’ve been running a series of articles on formative classroom assessment in the *Report on Education*. Along with examples taken from BC classrooms, I’ve talked about the main rationale for using assessment “for” and “as” learning – students do better on final assessments, those that “count”, if they’ve had the chance to improve their skill development with formative assessment along the way. Formative assessment helps teachers focus their instruction on areas that need more attention, and it lets students have an active role in improving their performance as they learn. Instead of feeling like failures, they learn to believe in themselves.

This week we’ll look at the last “summative” frontier, the secondary school. As a former secondary teacher and administrator, I can speak from experience. First, it’s important to acknowledge that there are amazing innovative assessment initiatives currently going on in secondary schools in this province. Second, these initiatives are even more impressive given that the

traditional structures in high schools tend to be all about sorting students through evaluating and grading the sum total of their learning rather than supporting it along the way. This makes the idea of using any assessment that doesn’t “count” for a mark unusual, to say the least.

Let me explain what I mean by that, because it has very little to do with the nature of people who work there, and everything to do with how things are set up. Secondary schools are traditionally organized around summative assessment, marks and grades, simply because the emphasis is on certifying student learning for graduation and post secondary admissions. That’s the reality, and that’s how things are done. And that’s why students often pose that question teachers dread, “Does this count for marks?” And of course there’s the unspoken second part of that, “Because if it doesn’t, I’m not doing it.”

When parents came in to find out how their children were doing when I was a secondary teacher, I patiently went through the numbers lined up after their child’s name on a marks sheet. I pointed out missing assignments and failed tests as if that explained it all if the final mark was in question.

But did it explain it? Not so much. That line of marks and percentages didn’t really tell me or the parents what that child knew or specifically what he or she still needed to learn. It would be pretty safe to say after that walk through the marks book, the parents and I were still clueless about that, as was the student.

(Editorial note: Does this ever ring true for me – after years away from secondary schools I can absolutely remember parent/teacher night in the school gym sitting across from parents with my mark book – E.D.)

But things are changing in secondary schools. It's not that summative assessment, or assessment "of" learning, is not happening, it's that the road along the way is changing. While many summative quizzes and assignments used to lead to the final mark like a relentless march to judgement, teachers are taking time now to find out what students know in a formative way before things get down to the summative "count".

Here's an example from H J Cambie Secondary in School District 38 (Richmond). The teachers involved are feeling their way with formative assessment, and aren't afraid to say so. They don't have all the answers, but they're determined to keep looking for them. Diane Graves, Literacy Leader at Cambie, sent in this description of her team's cross-curricular work in linking formative assessment with instruction to improve reading comprehension.

"Last October we used a performance-based assessment to test our grade eights' reading ability. This was done in their science class. We were shocked by how poorly they performed. Consequently then, our grade eight team (Linda O'Toole, Linda Claridge, Tracy Sullivan, Tim McCracken and I) met numerous times to review and revise our measurement tool and to reflect on our teaching practice."

"... To review and revise our measurement tool and reflect on our teaching practice." This simple phrase speaks volumes about the growing sea change around assessment in secondary schools. Instead of using assessment to find out where their students ranked in reading, this team looked at the flaws in their own formative assessment tool. They also agreed, based on assessment results, to use teaching strategies that help students access what they already know before and as they read. This included vocabulary strategies such as "Sort and Predict" and the use of images to access students' prior knowledge. The focus was on teaching in a way that helps students improve their reading comprehension by making explicit connections between what they already know and what they're trying to learn. They used the preliminary assessment results as a tool for planning instruction.

So did it work? Here's what Diane has to say, "At this time we do not have the official results from our most recent Performance Based Assessment. While marking the recent PBA though, we noticed there has been some improvement in the areas we have targeted. Still, it was not as much as we expected. Is it the tool, the teaching, or all of the above? The cycle of reflection, discussion, planning and then trying, begins again."

Diane reports that this cycle extends beyond the grade eight team. A larger literacy team of teachers from all areas and grades, educational assistants, administrators and student teachers meets every six to eight weeks to share lessons and look at samples of student work to inform their teaching. The conversation has become part of changing the assessment culture at Cambie.

But can this work in math class?

It can; it just requires an attitude shift.

Rob Sidley, President of the BC Association of Mathematics Teachers, is also a teacher of Math 12, Calculus and Math 8 at H J Cambie. Rob began his teaching career ten years ago, after completing training as a primary teacher. While he now has a Masters degree in mathematics, he admits that when he first began teaching math at secondary school he "felt like a fish out of water" because of his elementary perspective.

Now he's feeling as if he has some company in the pond as he and his colleagues "try to develop an assessment plan that changes our culture. It's a slow process. We're trying to develop assessment plans that support student learning, rather than just generating grades for report cards."

Rob comes back to that perennial "Does it count?" question that kids ask, too. "The goal is for the kids to "get" that it's about learning. Kids see schooling as doing tasks to generate grades – the learning gets lost in the process."

Rob estimates that he is doing up to 15 times more formative assessment "for" learning than summative

assessment “of” learning in his classroom. When I asked him how this culture change was going over with his grade-driven senior math students, Rob said, “Weaving it into practice - it becomes part of the learning, not a separate thing. They end up accepting it as part of the lesson. It’s safe to make a mistake, and the focus is on the learning, not the grading. When we assess with descriptive language, we can describe to students exactly what they need to do to improve.”

Rob finished off our chat with a favourite quote from Rick Stiggins that he uses to guide his classroom assessment practice, “Students can hit any target they can see and which stands still for them.”

Interested in reading more? Take a look at Rick Stiggins’ “Assessment Through the Student’s Eyes” in the May edition of 2007 *Educational Leadership*. Here’s a provocative quote to think about:

“... we must abandon the limiting belief that adults represent the most important assessment consumers or data-based decision makers in schools. Students’ thoughts and actions are at least as important as those of adults. The students’ emotional reaction to results will determine what they do in response” (p. 26).

Assessment for learning, assessment as a tool to improve learning is gaining ground across the province. British Columbia has a rich array of experts who are helping principals and teachers learn new skills that embed assessment in practice to improve rather than simply measure student learning. Many of you will have heard of the work of Caren Cameron and Faye Brownlie in this area – and of course Yrsa Jensen and Cathy Elliott from the British Columbia Education Leadership Council (BCELC) have done much work in Assessment for Learning. Many districts have resident experts who are following the lead of authors like Stiggins and changing the face of assessment. If you wish to know more about the world of assessment that Monica has described to us, connect yourselves to some of these leaders in assessment. In fact, if you need help making connections contact Monica at monica.pamer@gov.bc.ca.

Graduation Portfolio Assessment

Graduation Portfolio Assessment standards have been revised, simplified and renamed Graduation Transitions Program. The final version of the Graduation Transitions Program Guide is available at: www.bced.gov.bc.ca/graduation/grad-transitions/welcome.htm. The Program Guide will be printed and distributed to all BC secondary schools by September, 2007.

Key changes from the Portfolio are:

- Assessment is now “Requirement Met,” rather than a percentage
- Students must meet Prescribed Learning Outcomes for only three categories: Personal Health, Community Connections, and Career & Life

Students continue to collect evidence of their achievements and present selected items at a final presentation showcasing their unique learning.

Thank you to the many dedicated educators who took the time to provide valuable feedback on this aspect of the Graduation Program. We appreciate your ongoing efforts to support student achievement in BC’s secondary schools.



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