

May 18, 2007

Last week Monica Pamer provided an article describing different types of assessment and the purposes of assessment. I heard back from many of you that this was very helpful and that you plan to use this in parent communications. I also heard the need to continue the dialogue about assessment so that we come to a shared understanding of this important aspect of student learning. Monica offered to continue this dialogue and provided the following piece for your use. I hope you find this of value.

Classroom Assessment “For” and “As” Learning

The red pen is out and highlighters are in for beginning writers.

Last week I wrote about using formative assessment in the classroom in a way that supports students and lets them and the teacher know where they are in terms of their learning. Then the kids know what to work on, and the teacher knows what to teach.

Formative assessment along the way helps students do better when it comes to the final project, test, presentation etc. It helps them learn.

All kinds of assessment tools can be used for either formative or summative assessment – it all depends on how we use the information. To put it another way, both formative and summative assessment have a role - whether we’re supporting learning along the way or applying criteria to the end product and judging student performance.

But better to hear about someone who is actually doing this in the classroom, because that speaks to this idea in a very real way. Bonnie Chappell, Director of School Services in School District No. 57 (Prince George), sent along the following example from Liz Morland’s

grade one Writers’ Workshop class at Southridge Elementary School. This is a great illustration of formative assessment for learning, or to help the teacher plan instruction for individuals or a group. It’s also an example of assessment as learning. Students improve because they know their goals and use criteria to judge their own growth as writers.

The workshop begins with a whole class discussion of their intentions as writers and modeling what this looks like. Students are then supported through individual student conferences with Liz to help them start where they are developmentally and move along according to their individual needs. Liz is assessing for learning in order to adapt the classroom to what her students understand at this early point in their writing. The students feel successful from the start and encouraged to grow as writers.

When they’re ready, they begin to take more responsibility for their learning. The first step is developing criteria as a class. Here are a few of the insightful criteria Liz’s class of six-year-olds came up with to help themselves use imagery in their writing:

- Use delicious, interesting words to show, not tell.
- Make pictures in our head.
- Think!
- Use our words to “hook” the reader.

The students each choose a goal for their writing from the posted list of criteria. They highlight this chosen goal on their own copy of the criteria. The next time they conference with Liz they’ve highlighted the evidence of their goal in their writing.

I know I’m dating myself with this comment, but this sounds like a much better way to learn to write than the way I did – by staring at a page covered with red marks made by the teacher and wondering what they all meant.

Formative assessment isn't just for primary kids either. Next week we'll share an example of assessment for and as learning in the intermediate classroom.

To top it all off, as Southridge puts it, by involving students in this way "the grade one students in our schools have demonstrated tremendous growth."

Literacy, improving literacy levels for each student, is a central goal for all of us. Here is an interesting story from Bruce Jansen, Superintendent in School District No. 84 (Vancouver Island West), Gold River, for those of us who go to a map to find this area. The impact on adolescents of not being literate is profound. Bruce tells the story of students in a high school who were unable to read or were only marginally literate making great gains because of a teacher and a structured program. It is interesting that these students could describe their adaptive behaviors that allowed them to slip through elementary school and hide their low literacy. Rather than reaching out for help, students, like some adults, are too embarrassed to reveal that they cannot read.

A year ago, Dave Kerr, in his first year as Principal of Gold River Secondary School, brought forward a plan to revamp a program that had been introduced three years earlier to address the needs of students who were not experiencing success in the regular program. There were a variety of reasons for the lack of student success, but a low level of literacy was a common attribute of the students. In the redesign of the program, Dave knew it was essential to have the program focus on student needs and to have a teacher who was committed to the students and the program. Dave was fortunate to have one of his staff, John Levering, fill the vacancy. John is a Learning Assistance/Resource Teacher who works with the students for five of their eight classes. The program enrolls seventeen students in Grades 8 to 11 and involves the students in a number of subject areas. The program is guided by the belief that the teacher and the program need to meet the needs of the students. The students in the program have experienced remarkable changes as a result of two things - the teacher and the program.

The feature of this article is the success that the students have experienced in literacy. The program has adopted the Precision Reading program which is based on the research of Dr. Rick Freeze of the University of Manitoba. In the words of Dave Kerr, an outstanding educator of 33 years experience, "This is the best \$200 I have ever spent." The program develops the student's word recognition and fluency, and with fluency comes comprehension. Students work on the program on a daily basis and will point out to John if they haven't got to this part of their daily schedule.

Here are some of the results:

- All students were embarrassed to read aloud at the start of the year. Every student is now willing to read aloud.
- Students have accepted responsibility for their learning and level of achievement. Every student can tell you what level they are at in reading and where they started. They can also tell you how they ducked through elementary school.
- Two years ago a student was not able to recognize his name. This student now reads at a grade level of three years, three months.
- The majority of students have increased their level of reading by three years in this school year to date, September to April.
- There are two students who feel they are ready to return to the regular program next year.
- There are two students who are not in the class who are doing the program on their own time.

These are particularly incredible results, given the age of the students and the defensive stance the students had coming into the program.

There are other significant changes in addition to literacy and these include:

- Increase in self esteem and confidence.
- Great improvements in attendance. One student missed 102 days last year, and this year he has missed 30 days.

- Prior to this year the students were notorious for not completing projects in shop. This year the students are on their fourth and fifth projects and are keen to take the projects home to show their families.
- The students are involved in community service projects which have included catch and release spawners for the Department of Fisheries, building a playground for the First Nations' pre-school, community litter clean-up, and clean-up of a popular recreational campground.
- Another spin-off has been the students' self-assessment of their work (social responsibility: meeting rules, helping others, effort) and engaging in discussions about very important social issues they face and how to make better decisions.
- The kids spend considerable time in the class as a result of the safe environment that John and staff of the program provide for them. Students come in for breakfast and lunch which is available and play chess while they share meals and socialize.

This initiative by the school is a great success for the students. Congratulations are due to Dave Kerr and John Levering, and to Alison Cross and Marianne Cargill who support the students in the program and in classes outside of the program.

A veteran teacher, John Levering made an interesting comment to close on - "This is the best experience of my teaching career."

I hope you have a great week ahead of you as we head into the last few weeks of the school year.



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