

Assessment For Learning: Planning for Professional Development

©Anne Davies, Margaret Arbuckle, Doris Bonneau¹

Assessment has the power to transform both learning and teaching because it is so integrally linked to motivation and learning. The increased attention being paid to standards and their assessment has created a new opportunity to support learning and improve classroom practices. Providing long-term, differentiated, multi-dimensional and flexible approaches to adult learning for all members of the school community is essential and challenging. For many of us seizing this opportunity to support student learning requires rethinking adult learning and using assessment to guide our professional development work. In an assessment *for* learning environment, rather than something that happens at the end of the learning, assessment is used to support and inform learning, build self-confidence, and capacity for success. (Stiggins, 2001). Assessment *for* learning is ongoing, and requires deep involvement on the part of the learner in clarifying outcomes, monitoring on-going learning, collecting evidence and presenting evidence of learning to others. Understanding the difference between assessment of learning and assessment for learning is key.

[See Figure 1 - Page 10]

Assessment for learning has increasingly become the focus of research (Black & William, 1998; 2003; Crooks, 1988; Sadler, 1989; Stiggins, 2001). Assessment that directly supports learning has five key characteristics:

- learners are involved so a shared language and understanding of learning is developed,
- learners self-assess and receive specific, descriptive feedback about the learning during the learning,
- learners collect, organize, and communicate evidence of their learning with others,
- instruction is adjusted in response to ongoing assessment information, and
- a safe learning environment invites risk taking, encourages learning from mistakes, enables focused goal setting, and supports thoughtful learning.

Why use assessment *for* learning as the organizing core of adult learning? Experience and research tells us that adults (like student learners) have more ownership, are more motivated

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to learn, actually learn more when we ‘begin with the end in mind’ and involve learners of all ages in the assessment *for* learning process. We are using assessment to guide adult learning in the same way that classroom teachers are being asked to use assessment *for* learning to guide and support student learning.

Adult Learning for Student Learning

In order for adult learning to be successful, it needs to be on-going, sustained and connected to other aspects of change in the school community (Arbuckle, 2000). Adult learners are not unlike young children in their acquisition of new concepts. Adult learners also need to be engaged in their learning in a variety of ways both alone and with others. They need to know that success has many different looks. As people involved in designing adult learning opportunities, we undermine our work when we begin to think that efficiencies can be gained by doing the same thing, at the same time, in the same way (e.g. Little, 1994; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Senge, 1990). Learning needs to be encouraged and supported in multiple ways.

Adult learning that supports and sustains life long, independent, self-directed learners draws upon educators' strengths, communicates self worth and capability, and views participants' individual differences as a value-added benefit to the group. Learning leading to action is purposeful, grounded in work with students, and relevant to the adult learner. It is differentiated. Change - learning - engages learners in applying powerful ideas and practices in practical ways, offers opportunities for reflecting upon their experiences and the impact on students, and adjusting practices as needed.(e.g. Arbuckle, 2000; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Lieberman, 1995; Lieberman and Miller, 2001).

Differentiating Learning Needs and Strengths

The work of Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross (1994) provides a helpful framework for thinking about adult learning. Their research identified the following stages as adults change their habits and practices: precontemplation (thinking about thinking about it), contemplation (thinking about it), initiation (planning to do it), action (actually doing it), and maintenance (doing it consistently). To expand this framework beyond the self to others, we have added three more stages – teaming (doing it with someone else in order to sustain energy and learning), mentoring (helping others to do it), and leading the learning of others.

Using this framework enables us to analyze the needs of adult learners and design effective learning opportunities.

Listening To Learners

When we listen to adults talk, we learn about what they know and what they want to know. As we talk with educators and listen to accounts of their current challenges, we come to better understand what they might need or want to know and be able to do. Listening to learners also allows us to draw upon and respect the experiences they bring to our work together. They too are listening and learning. This kind of listening is a key part of assessment for learning. It allows professional learning opportunities to be designed and differentiated to meet emerging needs. It also models the assessment *for* learning strategies we are asking teachers to learn about and implement in their classrooms bringing our work with educators into alignment with assessment in classrooms. With assessment *for* learning as the base, educators are being engaged in conversations that focus on looking at student work (Blythe et al, 1999; Langer et al, 2003); considering assessment *for* learning strategies with their students in mind (Davies, 2003); reflecting upon research, theory, and teaching practices (Cushman, 1996; Glaude, in press; McDonald et al, 2003; Wellman & Garmston, 1999) as well as examining quantitative data generated from school, district and large scale assessments (Schmoker, 2001). Consider the school and district directions you are setting. What kind of learning opportunities are needed? What are you learning as you listen to the adult learners you serve and support?

Listening for Pre-Contemplation. Applying the extended framework of Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross (1994) to differentiate professional development begins with listening to learners. Ms.A wonders, “*This is nothing new. What is there to think about?*” Educators like Ms. A do not see a reason to change. As we listen to learners like Ms. A we realize the challenge is to provide a context where learning is necessary and supported. Finding ways to spark their interest without overwhelming them is essential. Opportunities need to be created to acknowledge what they already know and help them see connections between what they already do and what they need to consider given the goals they have for their students’ learning success.

Supporting Pre-Contemplation. Ms. A will be more likely to see the importance of change and continued learning if the school and district within which she works has a clear and coherent vision along with a long term commitment to support change. The kinds of

learning opportunities that support these educators in their learning include the articulation of clear direction, general awareness sessions to develop an understanding of the proposed changes, resource materials that provide practical information, as well as invitations to have conversations about what works with people they respect and from whom they are willing to learn.

Considering and Supporting Contemplation. Mr. B's point of view is characterized by, "Yes, the change is important and I'll think about it when I'm not so busy." The challenge of supporting learners who are beginning to contemplate taking action is to help educators like Mr. B understand that the proposed changes can make teaching and learning easier. They need to see that the change they are contemplating will support learning. For example, one change some schools and districts are undertaking is a focus on assessment *for* learning (Willis et al, 2002). There is much research and practical evidence that such a course can directly support student learning. For many educators, moving beyond contemplation also requires a shift in the focus of current classroom assessment. Educators need classroom and school-based assessment ideas that are simple and effective. Educators like Mr. B benefit from built-in learning time – structured conversations during faculty meetings, regular professional development time at the school and district level with colleagues, and access to resources to help them when they are ready to begin doing things differently. In this example, reflecting on current assessment practices and setting personal goals will support further learning.

[See Figure 2 - Page 11]

Initiation based on Inquiry. Ms. C is a colleague who muses, "Yes, the proposed changes are important and I think there are some changes I would like to make, but there isn't any time." Educators like Ms. C need help to see that the proposed changes are an essential part of the process of learning rather than an add on. At this stage, time is often identified as the greatest barrier to action - a very real problem. Busy educators can add no more to their already over-scheduled work lives. Ms. C and like-minded colleagues can become prepared for change by being invited by colleagues whom they respect to think about what they can stop doing in order to make room for taking action that has greater power to increase student learning. Supporting their planning with encouragement to select one new thing to try with their students enables initiation.

Supporting Initiation. There are ways to help educators like Ms. C to help themselves – release time to meet with colleagues, time to visit other classes and schools, time to hear

stories from colleagues that they trust – to see ways the proposed changes support student learning. Structured conversations that invite them to consider the related research and theory, successful teaching practices, and student work samples help make the proposed changes more real. As they consider specific changes in their own practice they need to know that others understand that learning involves risks and making mistakes is a natural part of all learning. They need reassurance that making mistakes will not reflect badly on them but rather be accepted as opportunities for everyone to learn more.

Enabling Action. Mr. D has been attending some district awareness workshops and reading articles. He has been talking to his colleagues. He has ideas that he wants to implement. He says, "Yes, I want to learn more. I have already begun by..." To maintain his high level of learning Mr. D needs to be supported and recognized. The challenge for those seeking to support the Mr. Ds is to listen and ask what kind of support is needed. Educators like Mr. D need easy access to practical ideas that work in his context. They need to be encouraged to proceed slowly and try just one new thing. They need to know that others understand this is a long-term undertaking. Educators like Mr. D appreciate time to learn and access to professional development opportunities such as workshops and conferences as well as resources (such as books, multi-media materials, videos, and on-line courses). Essential to Mr. D's success are opportunities to meet with small groups of colleagues both within his grade level (or department) as well as across the grade levels (or departments). In order to support Mr. D it is essential that the learning of these groups not be left to chance. Structured conversations provide necessary support during the time of learning (See for example, Cushman, 1996 or Davies, 2003). Learning while on the job is challenging. Choice and a safe learning environment help to make it more possible.

Deepening and Strengthening Learning. Ms. E works in a district that has had assessment for learning as a focus for more than three years. She has been learning about and trying different assessment concepts and tools in her classroom. She's excited about the impact on her students and wants to talk with others about what she's doing. "I need support to keep myself learning!" she exclaims. The challenge is to keep her enthusiasm alive through community with others. She needs to record her past successes and challenges as this record will support her through the tough times that are part of any learning. Professional development structures which provide for collaboration with colleagues and ongoing support for learning - such as faculty study groups, action research teams, reflective practice groups - will deepen her knowledge as well and maintain her motivation to learn. She also

needs continued reassurance that the district will continue to maintain their commitment to this focus and integrate any new initiatives into the assessment *for learning* umbrella.

Growing Mentors and Leaders. Mr. F is a veteran learner and educator. He has sought out different professional development options within and outside the district and has been applying and refining classroom practices for years. “*I want to get others involved and help my colleagues learn,*” he says. He’s ready to extend his learning and influence beyond the classroom. The challenge is to support educators like Mr. F and their transition from learner to learning leaders. Their leadership capacity is nurtured when they deepen their understanding of adult learning, are provided the support and resources needed to assist colleagues, and receive support to design and facilitate professional learning experiences. Learning to facilitate structured conversations and being invited to mentor colleagues is a beginning. With confidence, sharing effective classroom practices with colleagues beyond his school and district is a natural next step. Also, being invited and supported to write or represent their ideas and experiences is another powerful professional learning vehicle. Educators like Mr. F need encouragement and assistance to value their experiences and ideas enough to share their expertise with a new audience.

Mentoring and Leading

Each of these learners has different needs and requires different forms of support to further their learning – from different people, at different times, in different places in different ways. School leaders - teachers and administrators alike - play a critical role in stewarding both a new vision of assessment that supports learning and the differentiated professional support needed to achieve it. School leaders that mentor and steward the learning of others must continually seek information about powerful concepts and tools to use. They work to create collegial learning cultures – connecting people and information. They design and promote multiple opportunities for learning and use feedback to deepen the learning of their communities. (Arbuckle, 1997, 2000; Senge, 1990).

Building Professional Development to Meet All Learners’ Needs

We are all learners with different needs. Assessment *for learning* is helping us find ways to strengthen professional development. There are challenges to creating a thoughtful, professional development support system. Mentors, coaches, and leaders are asking:

How can we listen more carefully and create learning opportunities that meet educators' emerging needs? Providing a slate of learning opportunities and hoping the needs of educators will be met makes little sense in these times of scarce resources. Professional development needs to be based on more than what is available or what others are doing or what the “experts” recommend. It has to arise from deep listening to the needs that are emerging. The questions colleagues are asking can serve as a guide for planning differentiated professional development.

How can we find ways to acknowledge and value our differences, build upon our strengths, and invite everyone into learning experiences that make sense for them? It is essential that individual differences be honored while professional communities of learners are built and nurtured. Learning starts with individual needs and interest but is deepened and sustained only by learning in community with others.

How can we break the isolation so inherent in our schools and build professional community through a culture of interaction, substantive conversation, and reflective inquiry? This is unlikely to occur naturally and requires deliberate attention by leaders across the system. As Arbuckle (2000) notes, leaders need to create structures that bring people together within structures that are safe while promoting learning.

How can we let go of the need to control others' learning? Setting an expectation for learning is one thing. Unilaterally determining the What, How, When, Where and Why is another and unlikely to lead to desired results. The need to control others is often accompanied by an efficiency model – everyone on the same page, at the same time. It doesn't work. Students don't learn that way and neither do adults. Deep learning is a process driven by the learner. While a broad focus for learning may be common, the learning path itself will vary from learner to learner.

How can we create multiple learning opportunities for diverse learners? Educators, as students, learn from an array of engaging experiences that are connected to their own jobs and lives. One size never fits all. We are challenged to listen deeply to the questions learners have and respond in ways that support them given their questions.

How can we build leadership capacity beyond positional roles? Leadership belongs to everyone and leadership that is broadly exercised is essential to transforming schools. Building leadership is more complex than assigning roles of authority. It involves ensuring

the school and district culture is one where educators are regularly sharing their own learning as well as facilitating the learning of others respectfully and without judgment (Lieberman, 1995).

How can we take a long-term view? Constructing new learning takes time as we try things out, make mistakes, get feedback and self-assess in our pursuit of new ways of supporting students. It is a messy process that is not accomplished overnight. It requires a sustained commitment to learning as a priority.

The concept of assessment *for* learning has led us to reconstruct our understandings regarding professional learning. Many of the changes educators are seeking to implement are in some ways profoundly simple. They make sense and make a difference. Their implementation is complex because it requires a shift in thinking and in practice. Learning that emerges from listening to learners is essential. It arises from reflection informed by research and evidence of student learning. It is directed by personal goal setting within the context of school and district directions. It is supported by structured conversations that create opportunities to collaborate. It is shared with colleagues using a range of evidence to show learning. Taking time to incorporate changes in ways that strengthen and support current initiatives makes sense. Beginning quietly, but in inspirational ways, is often the best way to build a climate for sustained efforts that support change.

Figure 1

Two Key Assessment Purposes²

Assessment <u>of</u> Learning	Assessment <u>for</u> Learning
Checks what has been learned to date	Checks learning to decide what to do next
Is designed for those not directly involved in daily learning and teaching	Is designed to assist teachers and students
Is presented in a formal report	Is used in conversation about learning
Usually gathers information into easily digestible numbers, scores and grades	Usually detailed, specific and descriptive feedback in words (instead of numbers, scores and grades)
Usually compares the student's learning with either other students or the 'standard' for a grade level	Usually focused on improvement, compared with the student's 'previous best' and progress toward a standard
Does not need to involve the student	Needs to involve the student - the person most able to improve the learning

² Based on work currently being done in Britain (see www.assessment-reform-group.org.uk and shared by Ruth Sutton (2001)).

Figure 2 Self-Assessment (for Classroom Teachers)³	Met	On the Way	Beginning	Evidence
I involve students in on-going assessment for learning.				
I summarize in my own words the learning that students are expected to accomplish.				
I collect and review samples and models to show what the learning looks like for students of a particular age range.				
I think about what kinds of evidence students could produce to show they have learned what they needed to learn.				
I ensure the evidence of learning is valid and reliable by using the process of triangulation. I collect evidence over time so emerging trends and patterns can be identified.				
I use classroom assessment information to fine tune instruction and the learning environment for students.				
Students are able to articulate the learning destination.				
Students collect and refer to samples that show quality work.				
Students are able to describe what evidence of learning might look like.				
Students set criteria with me to define quality.				
Students have time to learn.				
Students receive and give themselves specific, descriptive feedback as they learn				
Students debrief their learning with their peers and others.				
Students self-assess, and set goals.				
Students revisit and reset the criteria as they learn more.				
Students collect evidence of their own learning.				
Students present evidence of learning to others and receive feedback.				
Students are fully involved in the assessment process. They are working harder and learning more.				

³ Note: Based on work by Richard Stiggins, Assessment Training Institute and adapted and extended by Anne Davies.

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