

#500, 11010-142 Street  
Edmonton, AB T5N 2R1  
Phone: (780) 447-9420  
Fax: (780) 447-2531

E-mail: [info@aac.ab.ca](mailto:info@aac.ab.ca)

Website: [www.aac.ab.ca](http://www.aac.ab.ca)

### **Important Dates**

**October 29, 2009**  
**8th Annual**  
**Leadership Day**

**October 30 – 31, 2009**  
**15th Annual**  
**Fall Conference**

*Assessment is...*

Shaw Conference Centre,  
Edmonton, Alberta

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**Spring 2009**

## **Relinquishing Control for Improved Student Performance— A Physics Teacher's Experience**

As teachers, our primary focus should be helping our students see success in our classes. One of the biggest changes in my teaching practice of twenty some years involved embracing assessment for learning strategies. Giving students the outcomes in advance, preparing them to show me what they know in a variety of ways and assessing curriculum content as part of my evaluative process has led to a profound change in my classroom. In my early years as a high school physics teacher I felt a need for control of the lessons. Physics 30 students are required to write the diploma exam at the end of the term worth half of their final mark. I felt it my responsibility to fill their brains with the knowledge so they could be successful. I found myself as an imparter of information where I was required to tell my students all they needed to know. I taught, they learned. Although my students usually did reasonably well on their final diploma exams, I felt that something was missing. A few years ago I became involved in assessment for learning strategies. Abandoning zeros, making students accountable for their work, giving continual descriptive feedback, focusing on understanding and process rather than memorizing facts and rote learning, has made an incredible difference in my classroom. I found I needed to relinquish "control" and take more of a facilitator role.

With a new program in Physics 30 this year, I felt it was time to make a change. For the first unit on momentum conservation I set up various momentum collision experiments around my classroom. Each student group was given a brief introduction and an information sheet on how the apparatus operated. They were then required to perform a momentum collision experiment at one of the stations, collect appropriate data, make inferences about what the data told them and do a complete analysis with detailed background information in the form of an individual formal lab report. My role in the process was to support, clarify, give feedback and assist with the understanding. Very little of my time was spent explaining "how or what" but rather helping them discover "why". Since many of the unit outcomes were covered by this project, I included it as half of their unit exam mark. Although giving up the "control" of learning was a big step for me, I found in the final analysis, the students gave me far more in terms of a deeper understanding of the concepts than I could have expected to see on a formal written unit exam. My biggest challenge now is finding activities and performance assessments for each of the subsequent units in the course. Although time consuming to initially plan, the results were more than worth the effort. My students are now asking what projects we will do for each of the units in the future.

Daryl Venance  
AISI Lead Teacher  
JR Robson High School  
Buffalo Trail Public Schools

When students are involved in their own assessment, mistakes become feedback they can use to adjust what they are doing. When others identify students' mistakes and feedback is limited to marks or letters, students are less likely to know what to do differently next time.

Anne Davies, *Making Classroom Assessment Work* (2000)

Question: How are we currently preparing students to give themselves descriptive feedback as opposed to receiving it from others?

## Assessment in Mrs. G's Classroom

I am a grade nine homeroom teacher who just happened to have math assigned to me about ten years ago. We all know that in junior high we are often assigned courses to teach that we really have no training in – but being the versatile people that we are, we eagerly agree to give it our best shot. Such is how I, Pam Gellhaus, came to be a 'math guru' in my school.

I have been trying this assessment idea for the last four years with varying degrees of success. I believe I am finally getting the idea of formative and summative assessment across to my students, and hopefully, to their parents. I have been asked to briefly describe how I am using formative assessment of math in my classroom. The following is what I am attempting to do with pretty good results:

I have my class arranged in 'pods' or 'islands', which consist of four desks. I make sure that there are students of varying mathematical ability in each pod. I will assign a quiz, like all good teachers do. This quiz will cover a specified amount of work from a specified chapter. This is the normal part! Upon completion of the quiz, I will ask the students to discuss each question on the quiz within their pod. If all members of their pod agree on the answer, they move on to the next question. If anyone in the pod has a different answer, they then must work through the question together until they all can agree on an answer. Any changes made on the quiz must be done in a different coloured pen or pencil, so the original answer is still evident. This process continues throughout the entire quiz. When everyone in the class has finished this process, I will then share the correct answers with the students.

I have found that by allowing the students to actually teach each other, their understanding of the questions and correcting of their mistakes has taken on a whole new phase of learning for them. Students have discovered and shared different strategies for solving problems and different ways of communicating those strategies to each other. After all, how we get to the goal doesn't really matter, as long as we all eventually get there. I have been amazed at how this teaching by students has really helped students at all levels to learn even the most difficult of concepts. I have had very little trouble keeping students focused on what they are doing, so don't be afraid to give this a try. My classroom is not exactly a quiet classroom, but I know that learning is taking place. As soon as the students have completed this sharing task, you will know, and then it is time to move on.

My students feel very comfortable working with their peers. They know that they can always come to me for assistance if they can't work a problem out within their pod, but that doesn't happen very often. It truly is amazing to watch the learning process that I see every day in my classroom. Kids are helping other kids and they are proud of their accomplishments. I think of myself more as a guide to their learning, instead of their boss.

Pam Gellhaus  
Junior High Teacher  
Jean Vanier School  
Elk Island Catholic Schools

Success begins the moment we understand that life is about growing; it is about acquiring the knowledge and skills we need to live more fully and effectively. Life is meant to be a never-ending education, and when this is fully appreciated, we are no longer survivors, but adventurers. Life becomes a journey of discovery, an exploration into our potential. Any joy and exuberance we experience in living are the fruits of our willingness to risk, our openness to change and our ability to create what we want for our lives.

David McNally, *Even Eagles Need a Push: Learning to Soar in a Changing World* (1990)

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Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn in school.

The chance of any reform improving student learning is remote unless district and school leaders agree with its purpose and appreciate what is required to make it work.

“How leadership influences student learning”. *Learning for Leadership Project*.  
 Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson and Kyla Wahlstrom.  
 The Wallace Foundation (2004)

## Descriptive Feedback ... the “Proof is in the Pudding”

In my position as assessment coach, I have been privileged to work in the classrooms of my colleagues. One sunny September afternoon, I was observing Ms. Lyons, an ELA 9 teacher engaged in a discussion with her class. The students had been doing a weekly writing activity, and she had created a rubric to evaluate the work. Based on a previous conversation, I knew that in her heart she didn't want to use the rubric for grading purposes at that time; she wanted to provide descriptive feedback. As a former ELA 9 teacher, I couldn't help but put myself in her shoes. If I were in the same position, I would have been tempted to do some telling... informing the students about the 'research' around the relationship between descriptive feedback and learning; how increasing descriptive feedback increases learning, and how, for the student, seeing a mark signifies the end of learning. Blah, blah, blah...

Ms. Lyons, however, was insightful and committed to student engagement. Though students pleaded for marks, saying things like, “If we don't have marks, we won't know how well we are doing” and “Marks help us know if we have to work harder”, she presented a compromise... an experiment of sorts. Ms. Lyons agreed to use both. On alternate weeks, she would use the rubric for the purpose of awarding grades. The other weeks she would focus on enabling students to be self-reflective, receiving teacher and peer feedback, and trusting in the promise of improved performance. What would come of this, I wondered?

A month or so later, I asked her how it was going. She shared some of the students' comments. Here is one that typifies the views of many others:

“Ms. Lyons, we need your descriptive feedback so that we can improve our writing. Without your comments and suggestions, we don't know where to begin.”

I think we both learned a most important lesson. Student understanding has deepened and their commitment to learning has been enhanced. They truly value descriptive feedback, and I value the process of allowing students to explore an issue. Learning truly is lifelong.

Noreen Holt, reflecting on the experiences of her colleague - Tracy Lyons  
 Grade Nine ELA Teacher  
 RF Staples School, Pembina Hills SD

A teacher who understands the need for teaching and learning to be a good match for students looks at every opportunity to know her students better. She sees conversations with individuals, classroom discussions, student work, observation and formal assessment as a way to gather just a little insight about what works for each learner.

Carol Ann Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed Ability Classroom* (2001, 20)

## Evidence of Learning Portfolios: Feedback

I attended the in-service at Madonna School facilitated by Debra Nelson and Aoife Cahill for Elk Island Catholic Schools. As I listened to the goals and objectives about the use of Learning Portfolios, I was inspired and enthusiastic about using this tool within my classroom community. Both Deb and Aoife provided examples of many templates and ideas that could be incorporated with a little effort.

It was already close to the end of Term 1 and I knew that it would take some preparation on my part to include this tool before report cards went out. It is most useful if the portfolios can be sent home prior to the report cards. This emphasizes the evidence of learning as opposed to a focus on a mark.

Here is a sample of what students had to say about the process.

“I really liked the Evidence of Learning Portfolios because I liked seeing how I have already improved from the beginning of the year and it was helpful to look back on work that I did well or needed help with. It was good to share with my parents because they were able to really see what I am learning about and how I am learning.”

–Alana

“I liked the Evidence of Learning Portfolios because it shows how I learn by looking back on my work and remembering what I did or didn’t do to make my work “green”. –Michael

“I think the Evidence Portfolios are important because they, “show what you know” and help your parents to understand your learning, and also, they help you be a great reflector.” – Andrea

I had already asked for each student to bring a scrapbook with their supplies and had already begun to place certain work in the portfolios. The difference now was the deliberate focus of each piece of evidence. With time restraints and an awareness that this was a “work in progress”, I had the students decide with me a piece of evidence from each subject that they felt would enable their parents to “look through their window of learning”. This idea became the title page on the front - “A Window into My Learning”. To complete the front, the prompt was given, “If our parents were standing outside our window and looked through, what would they see?” Students used this prompt to sketch evidence of what they learn. I had students also write a reflection/explanation under each sketch. Wow - this really took off! I learned a lot about attitudes and values within our learning environment from the cover page.

The next step was to include process as well as product. Each piece included a reflection and often their initial ideas, first drafts, rubrics, or checklists. Usually, the “I Can statement” or KLO (Key Learner Outcomes) are also included somewhere on the page. So much reflection went on! I was thoroughly impressed. Students were making comments such as, “Mrs. Boehm, I have two mistakes in my final draft!” Fantastic learning!

I then created a cover letter for parents based on the template from Deb. Prior to sending this home, I modeled with a student in front of the class how to go through the portfolio with their parent(s). The letter and portfolios were sent home the week before report cards.

The response was fantastic. Students felt very proud of work that was polished and were very honest about work that needed improvement. Parents had a deeper understanding of their child’s strengths and weaknesses. The portfolios provided an avenue for reflection, focus, and goal setting.

Next term, I have structured the process so that the students will mostly decide what goes in their portfolios. I have set up an area in the back that includes a file folder and reflection sheets for each child depending on what they want to show. I am very enthusiastic about this and would encourage others to learn more about the benefits of this learning tool.

Bonnie-Lynne Boehm  
Grade 4 Teacher  
Pope John XXIII Catholic School  
Elk Island Catholic Schools

