

## Chapter 7

# Building Capacity for Enhancing Classroom Assessment

This chapter provides examples of strategies, structures, and processes that individuals and groups in schools, districts, educational associations, provinces, and territories can use for building the necessary capacity to embed and sustain changes to classroom assessment. Each jurisdiction will have to decide how to integrate rethinking classroom assessment into its other capacity-building endeavours.

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Capacity-building is creating and maintaining the necessary conditions, culture, and structures that facilitate learning and skill-oriented experiences and opportunities, ensuring interrelationships and synergy between all the component parts.

(Stoll and Bolam, *Leadership in Communities*)

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The examples provided here are just a beginning. As educators rethink their classroom assessment, they will develop many more examples.

### Professional Learning

Deep learning and its application in practice requires more than just attending workshops and courses. Effective professional development is not simply a uniform delivery of information to teachers, but takes into account teachers' diverse backgrounds and the diverse contexts in which they work. Teachers themselves have a responsibility of acquiring pedagogical knowledge and disseminating it to others through networking. Professional learning can be formal (as in in-service and professional development sessions and professional growth planning), and it can be informal (as in close daily attention to classroom assessment practices). It can occur in initial

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A professional community of learners is one in which the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share learning and act on their learning. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for the students' benefit; this arrangement may also be termed *communities of continuous inquiry and improvement*.

(Hord, *Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*)

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teacher training or throughout teachers' careers. It can happen individually or collectively.

Some examples of strategies for building capacity through professional learning follow.

**Assessment Study Groups.** In a study group that is focussed on changing classroom assessment, teachers read about, study, talk about, observe, debate, and implement changes to assessment practices. They work together to extend what they do, to systematically monitor and make changes based on what they learn.

### Yukon Teacher Collaboration Teams

The Yukon has instituted a number of collaboration teams that are made up of teachers with various levels of teaching experience, and whose task it is to share their experiences and to visit each others' classrooms. Their goals are to

- provide collegial support to fellow teachers and exchange educational knowledge and ideas, especially for those who are in difficult teaching situations
- provide support to teachers new to the Yukon and to the teaching profession
- facilitate connections teachers make with other teachers in similar teaching environments
- help prevent teacher burnout and its effects on students
- reduce the frequency of transfer of teachers among schools and out of the teaching profession
- help teachers institute changes in their teaching styles and apply new learning from books or in-services
- provide teachers with the opportunity to visit other classrooms and schools in the Yukon

**Assessment Learning Walks.** During learning walks, teachers visit one another's classrooms and schools to observe assessment in action, discuss assessment approaches, share resources, consider student work, and plan changes to their assessment practices.

**Assessment Plans.** A template for planning assessment, such as the one found in Appendix 1, is a valuable tool for shaping thinking about assessment

practices and formulating new ones. Teachers can use this process to plan assessment in conjunction with their planning for instruction.

**Assessment Collaborations.** When teachers work together to consider the work that students have produced or to listen to students' presentations, they bring to this exercise the collective wisdom of all of the people in the group. More minds result in more reliable determinations of what students understand. Teachers can work together to develop a range of strategies for helping each student move forward.

**Assessment Action Research.** When educators engage in action research they try out some new approaches to assessment, and they develop a process for recording their success or obstacles to success. They use what they learn to adjust their practices, and they share what they have learned with others.

**Electronic Assessment Conference or Bulletin Board.** For some educators, it is not easy to have direct personal contact with colleagues. An electronic bulletin board or conference related to assessment allows them to ask one another questions, post examples, participate in discussions, and share ideas.

#### Resource:

Little et al., "Looking at Student Work for Teacher Learning, Teacher Community, and School Reform"

**Professional Reading and Writing about Assessment.** There are many excellent books and articles about classroom assessment, some of which are noted in the margins and included in the resource list at the end of this document. Reading these resources and keeping professional journals creates an opportunity for educators to review their own assessment experiences, reflect on their students' assessment experiences, examine their assessment beliefs and practices, stimulate new ideas, chart their own learning about assessment, and apply what they have learned.

**Assessment Audits.** Over the course of a term, teachers can keep detailed logs of their day-to-day assessment practices, including a description of the assessment and its purposes, how they have addressed issues of quality, and how they have used the assessment information. At the end of a term, teachers can review their logs and note what proportion of their assessment falls into each purpose, and they can determine changes that would improve the balance.

## Leadership and Support

The kinds of strategies for professional learning described above require leadership and support. Effective leadership in schools, districts, provinces, and

territories will ensure that the necessary policies are in place to encourage and endorse a focus on rethinking classroom assessment with purpose in mind. The WNCP itself is an excellent example of a policy-support system that provides leadership and direction through various project initiatives, such as the one that gave rise to this document.

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### Building a Culture of Collaboration

In the Edmonton Catholic Schools District, the Assessment for Learning initiative has brought together administrators and teachers into school leadership teams. A recent study of the initiative, which included interviews with 60 participants, demonstrated that colleagues working together (in multi-faceted approaches such as study groups, intervisitations, team planning) build collaborative school cultures and that collaboration is a powerful catalyst in making a positive difference for students. A condition for the success of these teams is high expectations and a sense of responsibility for colleagues' learning. As one teacher explained, "There's some accountability that's created because we are helping each other and looking out for each others' learning. It's kind of the expectation that you're going to come along as well."

(Patterson and Rolheiser, "Creating a Culture of Change")

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School and district leaders can do much to support teachers' continued development of their classroom assessment practices. In addition to providing access to the kinds of professional development strategies outlined above, there are a number of other possible strategies, including boundary-spanning activities, developing critical friendships, modelling, and making time.

**Using Boundary-Spanning Activities.** Leaders can play a pivotal role in giving classroom assessment a high profile by ensuring that boundaries between individual classrooms and whole schools are permeable. In the short term, this might mean that every meeting agenda include an example of good practice, which could be as simple as requesting staff to bring along a piece of student work to share. In the long term, school staffs could develop school improvement

plans that include the school-wide goal of enhancing classroom assessment. These plans would include indicators that show evidence of change.

**Developing Critical Friendships.** Critical friends offer support and honest, open critiques. When they have expertise in classroom assessment as well as

A critical friend is a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work, as friend.

(Costa and Kallick, *Assessment in the Learning Organization*)

sensitivity and the ability to listen and respond thoughtfully, critical friends can be an invaluable asset. They can observe what may not be apparent to insiders, facilitate reflection on classroom assessment practices, ask questions, and probe for justifications. They are not afraid to challenge assumptions, but they do it in a non-judgemental and helpful way. They also provide

reminders of accomplishments. Leaders are well-placed to broker critical friendship interactions in their districts and beyond.

**Modelling.** One of the most powerful ways that leaders can support the new learning of others is by modelling. Leaders can model the behaviours, attitudes, and commitments that they ask others to demonstrate. Leaders who make their

In more than 12 years of working with urban elementary schools on developing whole-school classroom practice, the University of Chicago's Center for School Improvement has found that little changes unless the principal is fully on board. (Bryk et al., "Urban School Development: Literacy as a Lever for Change")

own professional learning about classroom assessment apparent can underscore the "do as I do, as well as do as I say" message. This message stands not only in terms of the process of continuous learning about classroom assessment, but also in terms of the content. Whether it is in the context of

formal activities, like school improvement planning and working with professional growth plans, or in the informal, day-to-day, decisions that they are required to make, leaders draw on evidence to inform what happens next, to figure out how to best help others to help themselves, or to determine proficiency.

**Making Time.** Educators often feel that they have little control over the way that time is allocated in school. The one commodity that they say they do not have

The one commodity that teachers and administrators say they do not have enough of, even more so than money, is time: time to teach, time to converse, time to think, time to plan.

(Schlechty, *Schools for the Twenty-First Century: Leadership Imperatives for Educational Reform*)

enough of is time. Frustration about time is often expressed in relation to the feeling that one has to accomplish more than there is time for. However, the problem is not so much about lack of time but use of time. Rethinking classroom assessment is not about doing *more* but about doing *differently*. The challenge, as noted on the assessment pyramids shown in Fig. 2.1,

is to bring balance to classroom assessment practices. Leaders can help teachers make the thinking time they need by supporting opportunity cost analyses (the idea that everything that gets done has a cost in terms of what doesn't get done), and the decisions that follow. Leaders can support teachers by endorsing and encouraging opportunities for assessments *for* and *as* learning as a basis for

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We must make choices and become increasingly ingenious, and ingenious, in how we allocate scarce time.

(Lafleur, “The Time of Our Lives: Learning from the Time Experiences of Teachers and Administrators during a Period of Educational Reform”)

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having students more involved in their learning and reporting about their learning.

## Engaging Parents and Community

Intentionally creating a partnership is a useful way of engaging parents, students, and the community in the work of the school. Members of a partnership contribute mutually to reach goals, provide different perspectives on issues, offer support, and bring specific skills and strengths to the table. (The “letter home” example on page 35 and the example of student-led conferencing on page 49 show how partnerships can develop when assessment is not something that is

done *to* students but rather something that is done *with* students, *for* students, and *by* students.) Some strategies for developing successful school-family-community partnerships with a classroom assessment focus include (adapted from Epstein, 2002):

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Unless children ‘take the values home’ and the community understands and shares the school’s values, school improvement will flounder. Strategic work with the wider community is vitally important.

(English National College for School Leadership, *Making the Difference: Successful Leadership in Challenging Circumstances*)

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**Workshopping with Parents.** Provide workshops for parents to explain current classroom assessment practices, and to demonstrate how instruction is targeted and learning is supported.

**Communicating.** Establish mechanisms for timely, two-way communication between home and school that celebrates student success and identifies areas of concern. For example, use a folder to send student work home each week, with a space for student reflections and parent comments.

**Volunteering.** Survey parents and community members about their interests, strengths, and availability, and develop a program for using the volunteers to support the differentiated learning needs of students as directed by classroom assessment practices.

**Learning at Home.** Develop procedures that enable parents to monitor (and help students to monitor) homework, lend support, and give feedback to teachers, according to a set of outcomes-based criteria that teachers provide.

**Making Decisions.** Encourage and facilitate active involvement by both parents and students in assessment-informed decisions that affect the student, such as charting next steps. Use assessment *as* learning opportunities to encourage students to talk explicitly about their own learning, and encourage others to do the same.

***Celebrating with the Community.*** Consider producing a video series for local cable networks that highlights the assessment work that is being done in your schools. It could include footage of the process that you are engaged in and of teachers, students, and parents in discussion about assessment *for* learning, assessment *as* learning, and assessment *of* learning.

Rethinking classroom assessment may appear to be a daunting task. As teachers Christine and Paul discovered (see *A Vignette of Assessment in Action*, pages 18 to 26), focussed attention on assessment purposes and on the students in the class provide the starting point. However, we need to remember that teachers are not alone in making assessment a critical part of learning. As Margaret Mead once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world: indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” Nor should we underestimate the power of classroom assessment.

*Reflection:*

*What are some next steps that you or your learning team might explore in order to make a difference in student learning?*

