

# Next Steps

The focus on the purposes of assessment, and the process of making assessment *for* learning, assessment *as* learning, and assessment *of* learning distinct and identifiable parts of the teaching and learning process, is one of the most significant changes to occur in education. It represents a major shift in thinking toward assessment as a key contributor to enhancing learning for all students. It requires changes in the mindsets of educators, students, parents, and society.

## Key Ideas in Section III

- Shifting and balancing assessment purposes requires changes in habits of mind.
- Embedding and sustaining habits of mind requires professional learning.
- Building the capacity for rethinking and changing assessment requires systematic planning and implementation.
- WNCPC jurisdictions have many structures and resources already in place that can be mobilized for changing assessment practices.

# Section III



## Chapter 6

# Embedding and Sustaining Purposeful Classroom Assessment

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Learning is the imperative to equip future generations to respond and to survive in a frenetically and unpredictably changing world. The challenge for educators is to engage in new learning themselves in order to help students deal with the opportunities and stresses of shifting and unpredictable social forces on their lives.

(Stoll, Fink, and Earl, *It's about Learning [and It's about Time]: What's in it for Schools?*)

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Although many innovations have been introduced to educational systems, few have had a fundamental effect on what happens in classrooms. Change requires learning. Nothing can really change in schools unless teachers and administrators have learned new knowledge and skills, and are able to transfer that learning to the classroom.

Thinking about assessment as a major facilitator of learning is likely to be one of the most significant changes in classroom practice. This change will challenge many educators' fundamental beliefs about their work and about education, and it will require of them new knowledge and skills.

This document provides a framework and direction for teachers, administrators, and professional developers as they work together to make fundamental changes in classroom assessment practices. It does not offer “quick fixes.” This chapter offers ideas about what is needed to change and sustain assessment practices that differentiate learning for all students. Because assessment is intertwined with other dimensions of schooling, it is not possible to change one without changing the others. Significant changes in assessment will involve not only educators, but also parents and members of the wider community.

The success of embedding and sustaining any serious alteration to classroom practice depends on changes in the hearts and minds of individual teachers, administrators, and district or division leaders. Critical elements in the process are understanding and motivation to engage in the change, access to professional development to build the necessary capacity, support from local leadership, work environments that have capacity for continuous change and adjustment, and the support of the wider community.

## Understanding and Motivation

Changing practices requires deep understanding on the part of educators. Looking beyond immediate action, and into the reasons for the change and the

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Change is evolutionary, not revolutionary; persistence is essential, and patience is a virtue. There is no “there” in the educational change process. What matters is “getting there,” in fact to lots of “theres.” Educational change is, fundamentally, the accumulation of small ongoing improvements that are rooted in deep understanding on the part of teachers and motivated by deep understanding on the part of students. A journey worth taking.

(Earl, *The Paradox of Hope: Educating Young Adolescents*)

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subtle differences between the old and the new is essential. For most people, the approach to processing new information is conservative, in that human beings are inclined to preserve existing beliefs and habits rather than transform them or construct new ones. We tend to assimilate new information into our current knowledge structures, rather than create new structures to fit the new

information. We may integrate information into our comfort zones, and feel we are practising the innovation. But we may not have fully understood the innovation, and so have not made the intended changes.

Alternative assessment techniques have been part of the educational landscape for several decades, and, although many of them seem to have been adopted, significant changes in classroom assessment purposes have not been evident. In addition to having access to a collection of assessment tools, teachers require time to actively think about existing practices, decide what is different, and make conscious adaptations and innovations.

The shift from doing to thinking about assessment can be difficult. Doing feels productive. Doing suggests that there is progress and that the change will soon be established. But just going through the motions is not enough. It may, in fact, be counterproductive.

Changing assessment practices is not just intellectual work; indeed, assessment has an inherent emotional component that impacts on motivation. Consider, for example:

- Assessment *for* learning is premised on a belief that all students are capable of learning the intended curriculum, and that teachers have the requisite content knowledge and the pedagogical skills to find ways to facilitate students’ learning. If a teacher does not hold this view, he or she may feel conflicted and may focus negatively on why it can’t work.
- Assessment *as* learning requires reconceptualizing not just assessment, but teaching and learning as well. Assessment as learning means giving up the more traditional constructs of transmitting knowledge, “managing” classrooms, and maintaining control, and instead redistributing responsibilities in classrooms. This major shift in approach (and consequently in the student-teacher power arrangements) can produce a sense of disequilibrium and dissonance.

- Thinking about the quality concerns in assessment *of* learning brings past practices into question, and may indicate the need for new ways of doing things.

Each teacher will receive and respond to changes in classroom assessment practices from his or her own history, background, and experiences. These need to be drawn out, clarified, and investigated as part of any new learning.

It is important to understand that dissonance is a necessary part of change. Teachers who are making changes in their understanding of assessment, and learning new ways of assessing, are at the same time revisiting their views about how children learn and what role teachers play in supporting learning for every student. They are choosing to review, monitor, adapt, and reflect on their own effectiveness in the classroom. Indeed, these teachers are using the same processes as their students to become their own best assessors, and are following their own learning path.

## Capacity: Knowledge and Skills

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Capacity is a complex blend of motivation, skill, positive learning, organizational conditions and culture, and infrastructure of support. Put together, it gives individuals, groups and, ultimately, whole school communities the power to get involved in and sustain learning.

(Stoll et al., *Preparing for Change*)

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Although many teachers have very large repertoires of assessment methods, they may need to revisit and enhance their knowledge and skills in identifying purpose, deciding what to assess, choosing methods, ensuring quality, interpreting evidence, and using the assessment for the intended purpose. The framework for planning assessment that was used throughout the three chapters in Section II provides teachers with a

template for this process (see Appendix 1 for a blank template). Changing classroom assessment depends on teachers building repertoires of knowledge of learning theories, content knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge.

### *Learning Theory*

Research in the past few decades has fundamentally transformed what is known about how people learn. In order for teachers to use assessment to enhance

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## Powerful Insights about How People Learn

- 1) People come to learning with preconceptions about how the world works. If their initial understanding is not engaged, they may fail to grasp the new concepts and information that are taught or may learn them superficially and revert to their preconceptions in real situations.
- 2) To develop competence in an area of inquiry, people must
  - have a deep foundation of factual knowledge
  - understand facts and ideas in the context of a conceptual framework
  - organize knowledge in ways that facilitate retrieval and application
- 3) A “metacognitive” approach to instruction can help people learn to take control of their own learning by defining learning goals and monitoring their own progress in achieving them.

(National Research Council, *How People Learn: Bridging Research and Practice*)

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learning, they need an understanding of how people learn, as well as a focus on effective tools of assessment and teaching.

### ***Curriculum and Subject Content***

An important aspect of changing assessment to focus on learning is teachers being knowledgeable about the curriculum specific to the subject areas that they teach and the ways that people learn and master specific material. It is also important to be aware of the various misconceptions that students can bring to a subject, and the views that led them to their misconceptions. With this knowledge, teachers can provide useful descriptive feedback and create tasks that not only challenge students' existing beliefs, but also offer new ones that will advance their learning.

### ***Pedagogy and Differentiating Learning***

Attending to the purposes of assessment, and putting the emphasis on assessment *for* learning and assessment *as* learning, directs differentiating instruction for all students. When teachers have considerable expertise in tailoring pedagogical practice, they are in a good position to address the needs of groups and individuals. They can plan some learning contexts that are the same for all students, some for groups of students, and some for individuals. They can draw on a wide range of resources, activities, and strategies to engage students in their own learning, scaffold their learning along the way, and provide experiences that give students lots of practice and support. Their plans will provide the blueprint that they and their students can use to constantly identify the intentions, make the connections explicit, reinforce the relationships, and identify the misconceptions that can get in the way. Assessment is then the key to making on-the-spot modifications, or, if need be, proceeding in another direction.

## **Leadership**

Even when high-quality professional development and communities of practice are in place, changes will not occur unless there is also strong instructional leadership and creative management on the part of school administrators. Administrators have the responsibility for creating the conditions necessary for growth in teachers' professional knowledge. They require a thorough understanding of the theories and the practices of classroom assessment, so that they can effectively examine and modify school policies, help prioritize teachers' time, allocate funding, monitor changing practices, and create a culture within the school that allows teachers to feel safe as they challenge their own beliefs, and change their practices.

#### **Resource:**

Gregory and Kuzmich,  
*Data-Driven  
Differentiation in the  
Standards-Based  
Classroom*

## School and Community Support for Change

Because schooling is a strong and important pillar of each community, whenever any practices or policies in schools change it is important that the public understand the reasons for the changes, what the changes look like in practice, and the consequences of the changes. Assessment is the “public face” of education, and changes need to be shared with all who are affected.

Students comprise the first and most important group that needs to understand the changes being made. When students come to understand that the primary goal in the assessment process is learning (through assessment *for* learning and assessment *as* learning) and that the teacher is there to help them, they begin to trust that learning is not a competition, but rather the pursuit of a series of challenges that result in a sense of worthwhile achievement. When they eventually face assessment *of* learning conditions, students are likely to be competent and confident.

Parents comprise another group that needs to understand the changes that are being made. Assessment and evaluation have traditionally been viewed as private, mysterious activities, often accompanied by a sense of foreboding.

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New Zealand research shows that teachers and their curriculum leaders who work together to examine the implications of evidence of student achievement for their teaching had higher-achieving students. These teachers were involved in “learning conversations” based on a consideration of students’ work to help them reflect on how they might teach more effectively. One teacher described the process like this: “When you look at the assessments, you can identify where you are with your children. You can see where your hot spots are. It’s the sharing amongst the teachers. When you have a problem you just put it on the table and we all try to figure out what to do. Maybe others are teaching it differently, and you know these little bits help you. We all look forward now to actually sharing our results so we can figure out how to get it right for those children.”

(Timperley and Wiseman, *The Sustainability of Professional Development in Literacy*)

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Shifting parents’ perceptions, and winning their support, will take a concerted effort.

A third group that needs to understand the changes is the general public. It is important that they come to understand the purposes of assessment, and see how clarifying and separating the purposes can contribute to better decisions for all students and for society as a whole.

## Nurturing Inquiry Habits of Mind

If teachers are to support students’ efforts at becoming lifelong learners who are capable of meeting the challenges of a complex and constantly changing society, it is important that they, as well as their students,

- think and work with a mindset of being in charge of their own destinies, always hungry to know more
- value deep understanding
- reserve judgement and maintain a tolerance for ambiguity
- think about a range of perspectives while systematically posing increasingly focussed questions



## 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?*



# Appendices