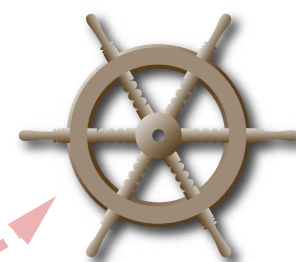


Charting Your Course FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Charting Your Course for Assessment Success

Betty-Jean Aucoin, Executive Staff Officer, Professional Development



Damian Cooper

Welcome Back! I hope all of you enjoyed a wonderful summer and have regained your passion and energy to begin a new educational journey. Throughout this summer I've had the opportunity to engage with teachers, faculty and support staff at various conferences, in services and planning sessions. I take this opportunity to thank educators for taking time out of your vacations to pursue professional development, leadership training and networking with colleagues.

This article will speak on a few points I connected with at the Nova Scotia Educational Leadership Consortium (NSELC) Assessment Summit. On August 20 and 21, 600 educators and partners of education from Nova Scotia and beyond participated in an assessment conference. This conference engaged educators in learning, dialogue and reflection with some of the best-known assessment researchers from Canada and the United States. Each spoke of assessment of learning and assessment *for* learning at the classroom, regional and provincial level. Most of the time was spent discussing assessment *for* learning at the classroom level noting this is the most important level and area of assessment and the foundation upon which all other assessments rest. In taking their lead, I will reflect on assessment *for* learning in our classrooms.

Richard Stiggins, an international leader in assessment, spoke about the history of assessment. He noted that our schools were charged to set up assessments to sift and sort students into winners and losers. We often used solely assessment of learning, summative testing and norm reference testing to align our students on a bell curve. Today, teachers are charged with the role of assisting all of our students in meeting standard outcomes. In the 21st century, a knowledge society cannot socially and economically support 30 to 50 per cent of its students failing. Therefore, assessment *for* learning in our classrooms needs to take precedence. To do this we need to have our students participate in their education asking themselves constantly these three questions. Where

am I going? Where am I now? How can I bridge the gap? These are the questions students who are successful and life long learners ask themselves each day. We must strive to have all students ask these questions and more importantly answer them. Only then will they know how to bridge the gap between failure and success. Students are not in our class to see us get tired, but to work focused on where they need to go to succeed.

When we ask students to engage in the three questions above, we are in fact demanding they work harder than we do. Instead of passing out a rubric we have developed ourselves, Anne Davies, noted Canadian educator and leader in classroom assessment, suggests we co-construct one with our students. She says that when learners note what counts, they can plan to learn and collect evidence of their learning.



Anne Davies (right) is thanked by Assessment Summit organizing committee member Kimberly Jackson-Sullivan, Coordinator of Assessment at the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board.

We demand that students think and tell us in their own language what needs to happen. When we are working together to discuss provincial outcomes and targets we ensure that the outcomes remain the focus.

Ken O'Connor, a Canadian assessment, grading and reporting consultant spoke about the fact that there are no such things as "right grades" but only "justifiable grades." He discussed what many of us already know and have been doing in grading outcomes, not tests or products. Teachers and students are then forced to think in terms of outcomes. When we are clear, students are clear. Don't communicate with percentages, but with descriptive information to inform the learner. O'Connor offered a simple way to communicate to students where they were in their learning—Wow! Got it! Nearly there! Oh no! Oops! Assessment of students' success should be on an individual basis, not on a bell curve. Students need to be clear on of how good is good enough, and need to know what quality work looks like.

Damian Cooper, another noted

Canadian researcher, tells us that assessment is not about ranking; it is about learning and answering questions. Where am I? Where do I want to be, and how can I improve? As a former coach, I resonated with Damian's definition of assessment *for* learning. He speaks of assessment *for* learning as the practice for the big game. During a practice, we provide feedback, modelling and skill sets to improve the game. Assessment *for* learning is reflected in coaching, a scrimmage, which is messy. Game day is assessment of learning where we score and assess how practices have gone. He, along with noted independent consultant and speaker Cassandra Erkens, wants us to move our students from only giving final answers towards those who can think and offer their reasoning. Erkens noted that our world is increasingly complex needing students who can construct new

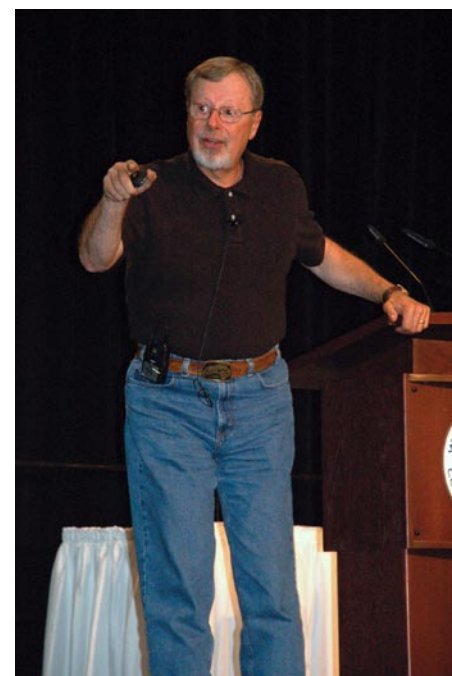
knowledge, engage in deep inquiry and problem solve. When a teacher takes home work of a student and corrects all of it, the individual who is improving practice is the teacher. If we only focus on what is right and the mark, we do not ask our students to think. Marks or grades are the shorthand for the real need for input in words having students focus on two or three ways to close the gap between where they are and where they need to be.

Erkens also spoke about common assessments. She clarified that this means teachers meet to determine and use a common subset of assessment instruments so they may subsequently have consistent information about their instructional practice. This consistent information can then be part of the essential professional conversation educators use to enhance and develop their practice and student learning.

Anne Davies reviewed her theories on the importance of students providing us assessments in product, in observation and in conversation. Students must also have a significant voice determining criteria for those assessments. Assessment *for* learning

is a journey each day where both teachers and students collect information on their progress and monitor over time how they are doing. She noted that the term *assess* is a Latin term meaning "to sit beside." Many of us as educators have sat or stood beside our students in conversation about their learning and where they need to go next. This is not evaluation, but the opportunity for us provide a simple rubric for students to reflect on their strengths, where they have grown, and what they need to work on. This is a goal of our profession.

On a final note, I ask that you align this discussion with your own journey of learning. All educators are on a journey of understanding research and practice regarding productive assessment for students. As each of us writes our own professional growth plan, we need to ask ourselves; where do I need to be as an educator? Where am I now as an educator? How can I close the gap? Just as our students need the support in the assessment *for* learning process, so do we. Who is there to sit beside you and support you in having the opportunity to close the gap on what you need to know regarding productive assessment and where you are at the present time. It is my hope each individual member receives the opportunity for time, resources, collaboration and feedback on the journey to be successful. There are opportunities to develop and expand our assessment literacy—from the Department of Education, our regional school boards, the NSELC, the Community College Educational Development Program (CCEDP), and of course, the NSTU professional development workshops. Please take in some of these opportunities to close your own gaps. Our students' success depends on it.



"Assessment in the past has done as much to contribute to the achievement gap as anything else. Conversely, it could be the most powerful narrower of the gap."
(Richard Stiggins)