

Developing A School Culture of Meaningful Feedback Deepens Everyone's Learning

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About This Series

This series of field-facing memos describes promising assessment for learning practices. The series examines the various ways in which Assessment for Learning Project grantees are using, adapting, and creating assessment practices oriented to learning. To see the full series, please visit https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/library/publications/Assessment_for_Learning_Project

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The [Assessment for Learning Project](#) (ALP) is a multi-year grant program and field-building initiative designed to fundamentally rethink the roles that assessment can and should play to advance student learning and improve K–12 education in the United States. If assessment is to become a lever for improving individual students' opportunities and capacities to learn, then assessment must also become a lever for achieving more equitable education outcomes. Led by the Center for Innovation in Education (CIE) at the University of Kentucky in partnership with Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC) at EDUCAUSE, the ALP project aims to develop the field's professional capacity to design and assess learning experiences in ways that simultaneously promote meaningful and equitable student learning. This memo, which is the third in a series, highlights the work of Summit View Elementary School in Tucson, Arizona and its use of ideas and practices from a blended online course, [Student Agency in Assessment and Learning](#) (SAAL) developed by researchers at WestEd, also an ALP grantee.

This memo describes how one school's participation in the blended course helped teachers actively use assessment for learning strategies, such as peer-to-peer feedback, in their teaching. This memo showcases ways in which Summit View teachers are learning to teach for deeper understanding by using these strategies in their classrooms and by making their teaching practices visible to themselves and their colleagues.

Located in the Sunnyside School District in the southern part of Tucson, most students at Summit View Elementary School are Hispanic (93%), designated as English language learners (90%), and qualify for free or reduced lunch (93.3%). Even though, according to one veteran teacher, the school is “in the middle of nowhere” and serves a low socio-economic population of students, it is a school “everybody has heard of” and “where there are no teaching vacancies.” This teacher attributed these successes to the principal, whose role in helping teachers to make their practices visible is highlighted in this memo. At Summit View, we see that developing a school-wide culture of adult feedback can support a school’s collective effort to create cultures of meaningful learning among students in classrooms. Creating a school culture where giving and receiving feedback that spurs deeper learning is commonplace is an assessment for learning practice. This practice operates at the organizational level and is critical for advancing the system-wide use of assessment for learning practices.

Big Ideas and Insights from this Memo

- Educators in schools—teachers, principals, and coaches—need safe, regular, and collaborative opportunities to examine their practice closely and hold it up to common standards of excellence.
- Reflective routines and knowledgeable feedback can help teachers make effective adjustments to their teaching.
- Principals play a pivotal role in leading a school-wide approach to assessment for learning by creating the conditions for adults to learn with and from each other.
- Giving teachers authentic opportunities and supports to provide meaningful feedback to each other teaches them how to give useful feedback to students and demonstrates under what conditions feedback deepens learning.
- Engaging in assessment for learning requires principals and teachers to change from an evaluative mindset to a learning mindset.
- A school culture replete with opportunities for self-assessment and meaningful adult feedback not only strengthens learning but also develops the collective will of the staff to do the challenging work necessary to improve and grow the community’s collective belief that improvement is possible.

Why Assessment for (Rather than of) Learning is Needed

Most educators recognize that standardized tests are inadequate for knowing how to improve student performance and teaching practice. Many would also agree with researcher David Conley (2015) who observed, “Over the past ten years, educators have learned the distinction between summative and formative assessments” (p. 27). Yet, Linda Darling-Hammond, Gene Wilhoit, Linda Pittenger (2014), David Conley (2015), and others have argued that educators still need to deepen their assessment knowledge and use a broader range of assessments in order to prepare students adequately for college, career, and life. They point to recent

research that has identified “a much more comprehensive, multi-faceted, and rich portrait of what constitutes a college-ready student,” and argue that we now know adequate preparation for college, career, and life will require “much more than content knowledge and foundational skills in reading and mathematics” (Conley, p. 12). Thus, they describe the increasing importance for students to know how to handle assignments or tasks that do not have one right answer, to raise pertinent questions, to gather additional information, to reason with evidence, and, ultimately, to make judgments in complex and dynamic situations.

Developing such abilities in our youth will help students engage in what they are learning and have ample opportunity to develop

the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions to engage successfully with complexity. Standardized assessments neither teach nor measure such skills. Therefore, to help students be well prepared to succeed in college, career, and life, a broad range of assessments and instructional practices are needed that develop students' abilities to think deeply, to reason with evidence, to make connections across subjects, and to formulate meaningful questions. Providing access to assessments that measure ambitious learning and supporting teachers to use these assessment approaches to help students learn are also important levers for equity.

ALP Grantees are Developing Assessment for Learning Practices

Given the significant need for the development and use of assessments that promote and measure more complex student-learning outcomes, ALP has awarded grants to a group of organizations—including individual schools, charter school organizations, a state department of education, public school districts, and intermediary organizations—that are developing assessments and assessment practices that foreground learning. In its unique approach to grant making, ALP actively supports its grantees and the organizations they serve to continue to learn in and from their individual and collective assessment for learning work. The grantees featured in this and subsequent memos were selected with ALP's assistance and represent the full range of grantee-types in the project. The aim is to identify and observe promising assessment for learning practices in use by grantees, learn about the development and implementation of these practices, and consider to what extent these practices advance ALP's [learning agenda](#).

Creating a Culture of Adult Learning

At Summit View, a small group of ten teachers and their principal participated in a blended online professional development course called Student Agency in Assessment & Learning (SAAL). The course focused on helping teachers gain knowledge and skills to support their students in managing and understanding their own learning. Specifically, the course provided content on two formative assessment practices: students' use of peer feedback and self-assessment. As described in the course materials, formative assessment involves teachers making adjustments to their instruction based on information they intentionally collect while students are learning. Formative assessment also involves providing students with feedback to help them advance their learning.¹

Video Study Groups Provide Structured Occasions to Support Teachers' Use of Student Peer Feedback

Course activities asked participants to apply key concepts from the course to their teaching.² During the SAAL course, teachers participated in video study groups (VSG) to focus on a specific dimension of student agency in their own teaching and were provided a Peer Feedback Continuum to support teachers in the process of reflecting on their instruction, giving and receiving feedback, and planning future instruction. (See Exhibit 1: SAAL Peer Feedback Continuum, p. 4.) Thus, within the context of the blended course, the VSG meetings provided a structure for engaging Summit View teachers in reflecting upon their teaching through the use of video examples of their own instruction. The Peer Feedback Continuum, which shows teacher and

Exhibit 1: Student Agency in Assessment & Learning (SAAL) Peer Feedback Continuum

	Beginning	Developing	Progressing	Extending
Structured Occasions	Limited structured occasions to support students providing and using feedback.	Adequate structured occasions to support students providing OR using feedback.	Adequate structured occasions to support students providing AND using feedback.	Powerful structured occasions to support students providing and using feedback.
Attention to Learning Goals and Success Criteria	Student feedback makes some reference to the Learning Goal and/or Success Criteria but does not support the Learning Goal and/or reflect the Success Criteria.	Student feedback references the Learning Goal and Success Criteria but minimally supports the Learning Goal and the Success Criteria.	Student feedback clearly references and supports the Learning Goal and reflects the Success Criteria.	Students can justify the feedback they provide to peers (e.g., what evidence in your learning and/or work related to the Goals and Criteria; "I used to give you this feedback..."; and "why I think this feedback will strengthen and/or improve your learning and/or work").
Engaging Thinking	Student feedback is evaluative (i.e., summative in nature – a grade, an evaluative comment). ----- OR ----- Student feedback does all the thinking for the peer (e.g., provides the solution or gives a specific direction to follow).	Student feedback does most of the thinking for the peer (e.g., provides a strong hint about the solution or prescribes a means for improvement). ----- OR ----- Student feedback partially scaffolds a next step for the peer to take (e.g., an area to work on).	Student feedback scaffolds an appropriate next step for the peer to take (e.g., an area to work on, followed by a suggestion or a cue).	Students giving and receiving feedback engage in productive, reciprocal discussion about their descriptive feedback (e.g., asking clarifying questions, discussing how peer feedback relates to peer's own work, discussing suggestions for improvement/next steps).
Applying Feedback	Students agree or disagree with the evaluative feedback, without advancing thinking and/or improving work products. ----- OR ----- Students apply or do not apply the feedback as directed, without engaging in any thinking about their work.	Students consider the feedback and make a decision about how to use the feedback (or not) to the specific piece of work without setting a goal for their next steps or broader learning.	Students use the feedback to focus on an area for improvement or a means to advance thinking and set a goal for next steps or broader learning.	Students apply the feedback with the purpose of advancing their thinking and/or improving their work products by setting a clear goal(s) for next steps in their current learning and making a plan to meet the goal or to direct future learning.

The shaded row focuses on teacher actions and the non-shaded rows focus on the students.

Source: <https://wested.ent.box.com/s/v48eprnbx58jow20y6o6su1l5xx9cy9>

student learning along a developmental continuum, provided a resource—almost like having a more expert peer in the room—that teachers could refer to when they examined their own instructional practices. This video-based approach to teacher learning gave teachers an authentic and personal experience with core formative assessment practices—such as engaging in an activity with a clear learning goal (i.e., the expectation to implement a new instructional practice connected to a specific dimension of student agency), seeing clearly articulated success criteria (e.g., the dimensions outlined on the Peer Feedback Continuum), and participating in a process for giving and receiving peer feedback. Thus, teachers experienced and learned the formative assessment process in ways that mirrored how students experience formative assessment.

Teachers engaged students in peer feedback practices to help students reach specific learning goals. Clarity of learning goal increases students' creativity rather than limiting it. Through their participation in the blended course, teachers began to elicit and use evidence of learning from the students' use of peer feedback practices in a formative way to inform their design of instruction. For example, one teacher described how, while watching herself on video in the presence of her peers, she noticed that some of her students were "not really understanding the point of the lesson" based upon the type of feedback she heard the students give to each other. As her colleagues asked her questions about how she had introduced the lesson to her students, she realized that she had probably not made the purpose of the lesson clear to the students. These sorts of insights helped teachers to make adjustments to their teaching and, in turn, deepen student learning.

The Principal Plays a Pivotal Role in Leading Assessment for Learning School-Wide

A principal can take actions that can grow a staff's capacity to learn (Jaquith, 2015; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). One way the principal at Summit View did this was by participating in the blended course with teachers and, thus, learning herself about ways to help students self-monitor their progress and learn how to learn. Participating with the teachers, the principal noticed specific challenges teachers at her school faced. For example, teachers were expected to develop clear learning goals for each lesson, communicate these goals to students, and help students understand what they would be learning and why, so that the students could take greater responsibility for their own learning. Teachers were also asked to anticipate important misconceptions that students might experience during a lesson and consider possible responses they could offer to help students. The principal was aware that students' levels of English language varied considerably and, therefore, it would be important for teachers to distinguish between students' misconceptions versus confusion about language. At Summit View, there was a strong desire to help students learn how to recognize and communicate their own learning needs, so that students could seek out and use a range of resources to help them. Administrators and teachers both viewed using assessment for learning practices—such as helping students to develop the skills to manage and understand their own learning and communicate their learning needs to teachers—as ways to promote equity and make learning opportunities more accessible to all students.

The principal also recognized how uncomfortable it was for teachers to make their teaching public with each other—and how important

this practice was for supporting teachers' collective learning. Initially, teachers watched a short video clip of their instruction and discussed it in a small, mixed-grade group. Commenting on the expectation to videotape one's teaching, a veteran teacher said, "It's tough to put yourself out there...Maybe you are not as good as you thought you were." The discomfort associated with making one's instruction public, a feeling prevalent among teachers in the United States, has roots in established attitudes held by many that teachers are supposed to be experts rather than learners. Therefore, according to this logic, demonstrations of teaching should show off expertise rather than provide opportunities for further learning. Another teacher said videotaping was "a good way to start" to open up their practice to each other, which she also described as "scary" at the beginning. Videotaping a short segment of a lesson "felt safe [because] you were in control of what people would see." But, this teacher also said that, eventually, the video clips seemed limiting: only some students in a class appeared on the video and teachers tended to spotlight "their best students [so it] wasn't really a realistic picture." The audio was sometimes difficult to hear and the teacher did not usually appear in the video. Not seeing the teacher was a drawback because teachers couldn't watch each other's instructional moves.

The principal wanted to address these hindrances to teachers' learning, and she wanted to attend to the instructional variability she had begun to notice existed within grade-level classrooms. She suspected that the teachers couldn't see the variability because they were meeting in mixed-grade level groups. So, the principal re-configured the VSG's, involved all the teachers in the school in the process of making their instruction public and a focus for collective learning, and developed new routines to respond to the various learning needs teachers expressed as they arose.

"Live" Observations Followed by Learning-Focused Conversations

Because the window into classroom instruction as well as students' response to the instruction was quite limited in the video recordings, the principal replaced the video study groups with "live" classroom observations. These occurred by grade level. A different grade-level teacher was observed each time. The overall goal was to hone teachers' abilities to notice instructional moves that contributed to (and potentially limited) student learning. The observation team included the teacher's grade-level colleagues, the principal, assistant principal, and school instructional coach. The observations were short, focused, and purposefully coordinated. The "live" observations were followed immediately by a brief and directed learning-focused conversation that aimed to identify effective elements of the practice and illuminate aspects for continued refinement.

On a morning in May, three grade levels (kindergarten, third, and fifth grade) participated in "live" observations. The focus of each observation was to observe student peer-to-peer feedback practices. (See Exhibit 2: A Live Observation, p. 7.) The principal wanted observers to notice what the students were doing and consider the instructional decisions that were related to students' use of peer feedback and the extent to which those decisions supported (or constrained) opportunities for students to direct and deepen their own learning.

After the observation, the observers and the "observed" teacher convened in the school's designated professional learning room to discuss what they saw. Each member of the group had a note-taker sheet and the Peer Feedback Continuum. The principal started the conversation by asking, "What structured occasions did you see for students to provide feedback?"

Exhibit 2: A Live Observation

Kindergartners sit two by two, quickly settling onto spots on the floor and at tables in the classroom, positioning themselves so that they face their reading partners. Observers spread out and sit close to the pairs of students. Each kindergartener takes a turn reading his/her own text to his/her partner while the listening partner provides the reader with feedback. Each student reads from a unique text that corresponded to the reader's level. A boy reads first and his partner, a girl, confidently provides feedback on specific reading strategies. She watches her partner's hands as he reads and tells him, "Use two fingers when you read." When he comes to a word he doesn't know, she says, "Sound it out," which her partner then does.

This question corresponded to the first dimension on the continuum. (See Exhibit 1: SAAL Peer Feedback Continuum, p. 4.) The group was asked about the nature of the feedback that students provided to each other and whether or not the readers were intentionally paired with each other. The conversation revealed their agreement that all students used some reading strategies that were taught—like two-finger pointing—and that the students were observed providing feedback to their partners. The teacher confirmed the reading partners were intentionally matched. A district administrator, who happened to visit that day, pointed out students' equitable opportunities to learn: "Every student had a book and a turn to read. The opportunity was the same for every kid. The differentiation came in the particular types of resources and tools that the students were given—the tools, the partners,

the levels of the books." A theme that ran through each of the "live" observation debriefs with teachers was a focus on equitable opportunities for learning in each classroom.

Further questioning from the principal and her administrative colleague led to new realizations. Did the students understand why to use these particular strategies? The teachers didn't think so. This conversation thread led the teachers to decide that they needed their instruction to focus on helping kindergartners understand the purpose for using the strategies, not just becoming, in the teachers' words, "doers of reading." The adults talked about the importance of helping these students make active meaning of the text while they were reading rather than focusing exclusively on fluency, for example. Their collective debrief of the classroom observation gave these educators an opportunity to consider if and how students were using the reading strategies. The questions they were asked helped them to delve more deeply into what students were learning and, equally important, what they might not understand. The educators noticed instances when structured occasions for skill building transferred to an integrated understanding of text, and they also noticed when structured skill building did not seem to transfer or support students' meaning making.

Establishing Structures and Routines for Meaningful Adult Peer-to-Peer Learning

The structures and routines in place at Sunnyside Elementary helped to promote adult learning in concrete ways. First of all, the purpose for observation was clear: to focus on students' opportunities to give peer feedback and to notice how students engaged in this practice. The purpose for the follow-up conversation was equally clear: to learn in and from the observation of a specific assessment for learning practice. In the words

of one teacher, the learning conversations involve three components: 1) What has the teacher done that promoted the assessment for learning practice? 2) What were some things that other teachers could take back to their classrooms? 3) How could the group push the observed teacher to strengthen or extend some aspect of his/her teaching practice? The structure of the conversation orients participants toward learning and applying what is learned, not judging the observed teacher.

Making time for discussion right after the observation occurred meant that impressions from the observation were fresh in people's minds. Arrangements were made so that the presenting teacher could step out of her classroom and participate in the conversation too. These arrangements required advance planning to make the transition between activities smooth. These logistics allowed the follow-up conversation to occur right away with everyone present, and this, in turn, meant multiple viewpoints were available to inform the conversation. The quick transitions meant all teachers were out of their classrooms for a minimal amount of time.

The use of the SAAL Peer Feedback Continuum, which was given to each person, helped guide the conversation and kept everyone's focus on specific aspects of peer feedback. Administrators asked most, but not all, of the questions. The questions were specific. They focused on what students were doing, how the teacher set up the activity, and the extent to which the instructional design seemed to enable (and/or constrain) each student's opportunities to engage in meaningful learning. The principal was alert to connect teachers' observations to particular aspects of instructional practice that she wanted to help her teachers strengthen, such as making sure that students understood the purpose for engaging in particular practices.

Establishing Sufficient Relational Trust So Learning Can Occur

When asked what Summit View teachers thought enabled them to have direct and honest conversations with each other about their teaching, they talked about the conversation agreements they made. One teacher reported, "We built norms about what we expect from each other as group members... and how things stay in our group." They also knew that the purpose of their conversation was to learn, not to evaluate each other. A teacher said, "We know that we're learning.... We're vulnerable with each other." Teachers reported that they do not evaluate the observed teacher; only the principal can do that:

We're just very honest, and whatever happens in our group, we know, stays. If we have a harder conversation about something that [the principal] is going to have to talk to that teacher about... it stays in that room. We all respect each other enough...We know that we're all learning this, and we can see how each teacher is trying.

Teachers and administrators described trying to build a culture of learning within the staff. One teacher spoke about developing a culture of learning among the staff as "a shared responsibility." Through the opportunities for adult learning that the teachers had, they took responsibility for what they were learning in ways that mirrored the sort of student agency they were promoting in their classrooms.

At Summit View Elementary School, with the guidance and intentional leadership of the principal, adult peer feedback practices became central to developing a professional culture where seeking out and providing meaningful feedback became a regular occurrence. Adults have made their own teaching the subject of

collaborative inquiry, and they have developed the capacity to be vulnerable with one another in order to improve their instruction, so that all students are able to learn and experience greater success. Reflecting back on what it was like to teach at Summit View a few years earlier, a teacher said, “I feel like our whole culture as a school has changed. Thinking back to how it was before...we were all very separate and very on our own...Collaboration wasn’t as meaningful; it was just planning.” This teacher recalled in the past they never had conversations about instruction and if they had a conversation about teaching “it would be biased because it would just be how you felt the lesson went.” She concluded:

Being able to see each other [teach] makes all the difference and...having a culture of open dialogue...We’re all getting pretty good at being vulnerable with each other about our practice...We just know that our students can do better than the scores show....We feel like we can improve, and our kids can improve, and that’s kind of exciting for all of us.

Challenges Worth Considering

Creating the conditions for adult learning to thrive within schools is not something that principals automatically know how to do. They will need ongoing support and feedback to be able to develop these conditions. Teachers may resist principals’ efforts. Teachers are likely to find the expectation to make their practice public and the subject of collaborative inquiry scary. Principals will need to develop strategies to respond to teachers’ fears. Enrolling with teachers in online courses like SAAL can help provide expertise in assessment for learning practices, external criteria against which teachers can examine their own practice, and an impetus for teachers to make their own instruction visible to colleagues.

Many teachers, principals, and principal supervisors will probably need to shift their view of assessment from an evaluative practice to a learning practice. This shift in mindset is significant. Achieving this shift will require steady reinforcement with actions, tools, materials, and activities that support a learning-orientation to assessment. This conception of assessment can (just as with students) be quickly undermined by competing practices—of which there are many—that use assessments to evaluate, sort, rank, or otherwise judge students, teachers, and administrators.

Another challenge to consider is how to celebrate and honor the courageous actions teachers (and principals) take to be vulnerable with each other and to try out assessment for learning practices while also cultivating an expectation that teachers (and principals) will make truthful observations, even when, as is always the case, a teacher’s well-intentioned efforts could still improve. Developing a norm of identifying “non-examples” of a practice that a group is trying to cultivate might be a less threatening way of identifying areas where further refinement is needed.

Finally, positional leaders, like principals and central office administrators, need to model a learning stance. Depending upon the existing culture within a district, which is, to a large extent, guided by the beliefs and behaviors of the superintendent, a willingness to learn and be vulnerable becomes more or less possible. When attempting to cultivate conditions that are conducive to others’ learning, the group must pay attention to how to alleviate the status difference among adults. In schools, this means reducing the status and power differences between administrators and teachers, but also between veteran and new teachers, between general education and special education teachers, and between certificated and non-certificated staff. Leaders have an important role to play in creating these conditions

that are more (or less) conducive to adult professional learning. Making themselves vulnerable and demonstrating learning behaviors of their own, such as asking questions and seeking feedback, may help to normalize the expectation that educators in schools should

contribute to and take responsibility for their professional learning. When the central office focuses on developing its own capacity to learn how to support principals in their leadership, status differences that otherwise might interfere with learning can be diminished.³

Reflection Questions

These reflection questions are intended to spark consideration of how efforts to develop a culture of meaningful feedback among adults in schools can strengthen the quality of daily instruction and thereby increase the quality of student learning for each student in the school.

- At Summit View Elementary School, the school established (and adapted) structures, norms, and routines to create conditions to support teachers' use of assessment for learning practices and to make it possible for adults to learn together from their use. At your school, are there structures in place for adults to self-assess teaching practice and to learn from each other? What are the conditions that support teachers and administrators at your school to learn in and from the use of assessment for learning practices? Are there other conditions that, if they existed in your school, would allow for greater use of assessment for learning practices and/or would increase the overall learning from using these practices?
- The maxim that there is no hierarchy in learning is lived out in the actions of all the adults at Summit View and is modeled by those with positional authority. At your school, how do status, power, and positional authority affect opportunities for professional learning?
- Making the use of specific assessment for learning practices visible and public is a strategy for both teachers and administrators to learn together about how to strengthen these practices. What, if any, ways exist at your school to see teachers using assessment for learning practices? What actions could teachers and/or administrators take to strengthen the learning that occurs during such opportunities?

Endnotes

¹ See the description of the SAAL course at <https://fa-insights.wested.org/saal/pld/> on the SAAL website (<https://fa-insights.wested.org/saal/>).

² A description of the professional learning design of WestEd's digital professional learning course is available on its website (<https://www.wested.org/news-events/formative-assessment-insights-online-professional-learning/>).

³ For more information about how the central office can support principals as instructional leaders, see Jaquith (2017) pp. 131-158.

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