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Assessment empowerment 101: What it is, why it matters, and how to do it

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The challenges of the last two years bring great opportunity for positive change. We have a chance to remember and return to what's most important: the learning success, well-being, and self-efficacy of our students.

In this collection of Teach. Learn. Grow. posts, Erin Beard, content design coordinator on NWEA's professional learning team, offers an approach for shifting mindsets, structures, and practices in ways that fuel learners and learning. Read her suggestions for how to make powerful moves so responsive teaching and learning practices empower each student to attain their full potential as a thriving, self-determined individual and community member.

While the examples in this book focus on the classroom level, the information can also be helpful for teams, schools, and districts.

It's time to embrace assessment empowerment

I don't know about you, but I was never taught how to partner with my students to operate as an effective learning team. I just followed what I had experienced as a student: Rules and responsibilities were given *to* us and we were expected to comply. In other words, when I began teaching, I used a learner-manager frame of mind, which impacted how I structured the conditions needed for formative assessment practices, such as peer feedback.

My guidance for peer feedback in particular used to look something like this: "Students, pass your paragraph to the person to the left. Once you receive the paragraph, give your classmate feedback. Be respectful!" As you can imagine, my students were *not* engaged and the feedback was *not* robust. I spent too much time addressing off-task and disrespectful behaviors. I was overwhelmed and frustrated. I thought, "Peer feedback just doesn't work. Everyone says it's a high-impact formative assessment practice, but I don't see how that's possible!"

My journey to student empowerment

Over time, I learned more from mentors, resources, and professional development experiences. Part of my learning journey included recognizing that I was stuck in a learner-manager way of thinking about assessment and the collaborative conditions needed to make assessment processes successful. My understanding of assessment processes, purpose, beliefs, roles, and motivators fell on the left-hand side of the chart below.

	Learner manager **Thinking and acting with the following mental model (*conscious or unconscious*) of assessment:**	**Learner empowerer** **Thinking and acting with the following *conscious* mental model of assessment**
Process	• Teach • Test • Assign grades or scores	• What are we learning and why? • How do we get there and beyond? • How are we doing? What's next?
Purpose	• Rank and sort • Act in compliance	• Build relationships for growth and self-efficacy • Fuel and affirm learners and learning
Beliefs	• Not everyone can or will learn • Learner voice and experience: not assets	• Everyone can or will learn • Learner voice and experience: assets
Roles	• Educator-directed • Learners: recipients of knowledge	• Educators, students, peers: learning team • Teachers, students, peers: co-owners of learning
Motivators	• Extrinisic • Scores/grades/ranking as carrot and stick	• Intrinsic • Safety, belonging, meaning, voice, choice, growth

As I began to learn more about the research behind student-involved assessment and trauma-informed practices, I realized I had opportunities to better serve my students. When I understood the learner- and learning-affirming intent of assessment literacy and formative assessment scholarship, I made a choice to start shifting my thinking and language, which also affected my day-to-day structures and practices.

One big change I made was beginning to use the term "assessment empowerment." That helped me think about the systems and actions needed to move beyond managing learners to empowering the use of assessment processes in ways that affirm authentic learning and self-determination. Another big change was embracing assessment processes and tools as essential and integrated components of responsive teaching and learning cycles, not separate instructional events. One way I put this new learning into action: I used words of partnership with my students—words that supported their individuality and reflected my belief in them—to build and strengthen our relationships. I intentionally co-crafted learning-team tools, such as class constitutions or social contracts *with* students, which set up success with later responsive teaching and learning practices, such as peer feedback and self-assessment. The tools and processes leveraged students' context (their strengths, interests, funds of knowledge, identities, and needs) to nurture a safe environment and respectful relationships.

Eventually, when it came time to engage in collaborative responsive teaching and learning exercises such as peer feedback, guidance looked more like this: "Before you exchange paragraphs with a partner for peer feedback, remind each other about the purpose for your time together and how we will use the learning-team expectations in our class constitution to be successful with this process and our learning goal." The difference with students was impossible to ignore. They genuinely engaged in giving feedback, which meant I spent less energy on behavior redirection. The feedback was also far more robust, which saved me from being the sole source of support. Students built self-efficacy skills in tandem with content skills, too, which led to far greater success as learners and, more importantly, human beings.

How you can make the empowerment shift, too

My lack of preparation and slow evolution to becoming a learner empowerer is not unique, and I want to change that. There are still far too many students experiencing learner-manager systems and practices, which can add to educational disparity as well as toxic stress and trauma. There are also far too many educators who feel overwhelmed and frustrated with formative assessment structures and practices, like I did.

Where are you in your empowerment journey? Our assessment empowerment discussion prompts worksheet can help you understand where you're starting from. The assessment-empowerment frame advances existing scholarship, including updating the five keys of assessment literacy and the formative assessment cycle, to ensure that the empowering intent of responsive teaching and learning remains front and center as systems and practices are created and used. I will focus on digging deep into each of these principles and giving you pragmatic advice for how to bring them to life in your classroom throughout this book.

1. **Leverage learner context:** All assessment structures, practices, and tools are informed by and responsive to learners' personal and local context. (Context includes strengths, interests, funds of knowledge, identities, and needs.)
2. **Nurture learning environments and relationships:** There is a deliberate, collaborative attention to fostering a diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible culture of learning.
3. **Attend to purpose:** There are balanced, coherent, and articulated assessment processes and practices that match the learner context and learning goals.
4. **Engage in responsive learning cycles:** High-quality, human-centered, learning goal–driven processes, practices, and tools fuel agency and success for all students.
5. **Exchange learning information:** Details on assessment processes, practices, results, and use of results are communicated in ways that are inclusive, accessible, and meaningful.

Ready to get started? Just turn the page to read about the first principle of assessment empowerment, how to leverage learner context. **TLG**

Begin your assessment empowerment journey with principle #1: Learner context

I am the youngest sibling in my family, and like many youngests, I would hear, "Oh, you're so-and-so's little sister" a lot from teachers growing up. I would politely nod while also worrying: Am I going to be compared to my brothers? Am I going to be considered a disappointment because I'm not as smart or athletic or creative? Will my teachers get to know and respond to *me*?

Sometimes teachers would truly see me; sometimes they wouldn't. Those experiences inspire me to this day. I don't want any learner to ever have to worry about how assumptions or comparisons might hold them back. I also know that experiences like these are just a fraction of what so many kids worry about and go through, especially students who are from marginalized groups. Many of those kids are weighed down by much heavier questions: Will my math teacher think I can't do math because I'm a girl? Will my teacher listen if I ask them to use my preferred name and pronouns? Will my teacher always make me speak in English, or can I use other languages to better express what I'm trying to say?

Assessment empowerment starts with learner context

It's common to make decisions based on assumptions or comparisons. We're all only human, after all, not to mention tired and overworked. But if we don't check ourselves, we risk operating as learner managers instead of learner empowerers, albeit unconsciously, which can lead us to making decisions based on limited information, instead of *with* students and informed by *their* context: their strengths, interests, funds of knowledge, identities, and needs.

Learner manager mindset
Applied *to* learners

Interferes with learning and can contribute to disparity and trauma

Learner empowerer mindset
Applied *with* learners

Fuels learning and can alleviate the effects of disparity and trauma

Partnering with learners to know and use their context is critical for student well-being, agency, and learning success, as well as educational equity and effective assessment processes. This human-first approach is not new. Improvement-science principles shared by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching include making sure continuous improvement processes begin with gathering, analyzing, and using empathy data because, as educator Sharon Greenberg states, "If you want to teach someone well, you have to know who you're teaching." Human-centered design, a process, mindset, and approach to solving complex problems, also begins with understanding the people who experience a challenge or structure so that the solution can be successful.

Assessment empowerment draws on these existing human-centered approaches, assessment scholarship, and the understanding that assessment processes are integral parts of responsive teaching and learning cycles to ensure that both big-picture and day-to-day structures and practices at each level of the educational ecosystem fuel all students to attain their full potential as thriving, self-determined individuals and community members.

Who

Stakeholders in the educational ecosystem are the learners, educators, caregivers, communities, decision-makers, and organizations.

What

Stakeholders shift from a learner *manager* to a learner *empowerer* mindset. They use assessment processes and tools as essential and integrated parts of teaching and learning. Their mindset and actions fuel all learners to attain their full potential as thriving, self-determined individuals and community members.

How

Stakeholders collaborate to apply the five assessment empowerment principles,* which enable responsive-teaching-and-learning structures and practices.

5 assessment empowerment principles

1. Analyze and apply learner context.
2. Cultivate a community of learning.
3. Attend to assessment purpose.
4. Engage in responsive learning cycles.
5. Exchange learning evidence information.

*The five principles of assesment empowerment are inspired by the "Five Keys of Classroom Assessment Quality" from Jan Chappius and Rick Stiggins, *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing It Right—Using It Well*, 3rd ed. (Nyew York: Pearson, 2021), 11.

Let's start the work of assessment empowerment by exploring that first principle: Leverage learner context.

Breaking down the definition of "leverage learner context"

At NWEA®, we define the first principle of assessment empowerment as follows: All assessment structures, practices, and tools are informed by and responsive to learners' personal and local context. (Context includes strengths, interests, funds of knowledge, identities, and needs.)

It's important to understand the following key phrases in that definition before we can begin to do things differently as educators:

- Informed by and responsive to learners' personal context
- Informed by and responsive to learners' local context

"Informed by and responsive to learners' personal context" means that we know our students beyond demographic data or shortcomings, and we use the information with them to fuel motivation, well-being, and growth. "Informed by and responsive to learners' local context" means that we also learn, value, and actively use the student's strengths, interests, funds of knowledge, and identities, as well as the needs of their unique families and communities.

From theory to practice

Here are a day-to-day classroom example and a big-picture school example to help you celebrate how you already apply the first principle of assessment empowerment as well as plan next steps for continuous improvement.

Partnering with learners to know and use their context [...] is critical for student well-being, agency, and learning success, as well as educational equity and effective assessment processes.

A classroom example

Ms. McKenzie, a ninth-grade ELA teacher, knows her students' demographic information because it's available through her school's data management system, but she doesn't stop there. She teams with students throughout the year to get to know them better, and she uses the information to inform collaborative teaching and learning moves, including assessment decisions.

For instance, before Ms. McKenzie begins a unit to practice and apply reading complex texts to analyze character development, she partners with her students on a variation of the exercise "What I wish my teacher knew." The questions prompt students to share information that they choose about their interests, strengths, funds of knowledge, identities, and needs related to reading and character analysis as well as learning or personal interests, aspirations, and concerns. Ms. McKenzie and her students use this information to make

responsive decisions in the unit, such as forming flexible learning paths, making meaningful connections to other texts, selecting independent-reading texts, and inviting guest speakers. Ms. McKenzie and her students also use it to shape responsive formative and summative tasks, which are components of the responsive learning cycle. For instance, in pre-unit planning, Ms. McKenzie outlines formative and summative tasks that allow for voice and choice, such as choosing from a menu of options to practice and then demonstrate character analysis skills. During the learning journey, she includes the assessment menu options that connect to students' context or prompt students to propose their own tasks.

A school example

Just like Ms. McKenzie, Principal Hartt has plenty of demographic information on her school's student body, but she knows that's only part of the picture. She collaborates with English language learner (ELL) specialists Mr. Breeden and Ms. Prusko to gather first-person perspectives from bilingual or multilingual students and their families to better understand how they are experiencing classroom responsive teaching and learning structures and processes as well as the school's multi-tiered system of support (MTSS). The trio draft interview questions that help them gather more information about family funds of knowledge as well as perspective regarding experiences with classroom assessment and MTSS.

With the help of the district ELL services team, including translators, they interview their bilingual and multilingual students and their families. These interviews reveal previously unconsidered improvement insights that benefit the bi-/multilingual students as well as the general student community. Principal Hartt shares the results of the interviews with the school leadership team so that, together, they can make decisions on responsive teaching and learning as well as MTSS systems and practices that are informed by the wisdom and experiences of bilingual and multilingual students and their families.

Get started

You might be thinking, "But I already know and use my learners' personal and local context." Excellent! I'm so glad you do! Now, how can you push yourself a little more? The following reflection prompts can help you refine how you gather and use information *with* learners.

- How do I gather, understand, and use students' context to inform assessment processes that fuel learners and learning? What specific strategies can I think about that are worth continuing? How can I improve upon what I'm already doing?
- In what ways are my students engaged as active agents in contributing, gathering, and using context to inform affirming and responsive teaching and learning processes? What specific examples of their engagement can I keep encouraging? What are some new ways I can support their active participation?

Or maybe at this point you're thinking, "Well, this is a nice idea, but how can I possibly find the time it takes to partner with students to really know their context?!" Whenever I begin to feel overwhelmed by figuring out where to start, I think of a quote attributed to Jan Chappuis: "Start somewhere. Go slow(ly). Don't stop." Consider starting one of the examples I described above. How could you adapt one or more of those ideas in ways that are relevant for your role, teaching and learning environment, and learners? For more ideas on how to take the next step in connecting with your students, read "Teach using the lived experiences of your students," "Exploring cultural concepts: Funds of knowledge," and "A 4-part system for getting to know your students."

Although they might not always say so out loud, many students have the same concern I described earlier: Will my teachers get to know and respond to me? Let's partner with them to make sure our answer, especially when making decisions about assessment systems and practices, is an emphatic "Yes!" **TLG**

Continue your assessment empowerment work with principle #2: Learning environments and relationships

School environments and relationships are key to students' success, well-being, and self-efficacy. COVID-19 reminded us of this. It also reminded us of how critical responsive teaching and learning processes are for learners, while research into learning during the pandemic proved what we all feared was true: school closures exacerbated educational inequity.

Safe spaces and interactions are so important to children that attending to learning environments and relationships is the second principle of assessment empowerment. But what does it look like to authentically partner with students to foster a diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible culture of learning from day one? How can we leverage high-impact responsive teaching and learning processes, like goal-setting, feedback, and self-assessment, to support this work? Let's explore a couple sample scenarios.

Examples to follow

The day-one scenarios below can help us build fruitful learning environments and relationships with students. They're based on the stars-and-stairs framework to prompt us to remember to celebrate what's working and identify next steps. Rick Stiggins et al. describe the value of this model in ***Classroom Assessment for Student Learning***: "All learners, especially struggling ones, need to know that they did something right, and our job as teachers is to find it and label it for them, before launching into what they need to improve." It's important to give educators stars (validation/celebration) and stairs (action steps), just like we do for our students, because we, too, need constructive input to learn and grow.

Scenario 1

It's the first day of a new semester. As the freshmen enter the room, Mr. Sadler hands out the course syllabus. This contains all the information they need to be successful in physical science, including class rules, procedures, learning targets, and major projects. Students choose their own seat, and after the bell rings, Mr. Sadler greets the class from the front of the classroom and begins to read through the information on the syllabus.

Mr. Sadler makes several great educator moves, and there are also opportunities to have an even bigger impact on his students. Before reading our feedback ideas, take a moment to think about what stars-and-stairs feedback you would give him.

Stars (validation/celebration): *In what ways has the educator…*

- Authentically partnered with students to foster a diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible culture of learning?
- Set up success for high-impact responsive teaching and learning processes, such as student goal-setting, feedback, and self-assessment?

Stairs (action steps): *What are some steps or adjustments the educator could make to…*

- More authentically partner with students to foster a diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible culture of learning?
- Further set up success for high-impact responsive teaching and learning processes, such as student goal-setting, feedback, and self-assessment?

Here's our feedback for Mr. Sadler:

- **Stars:** You positioned yourself to interact with students right as they came into the learning space, which is a great start to establishing relationships. You then used the syllabus to communicate important rules, procedures, learning goals, and projects, which is one way to make information and learning goals clear to students. When learning information and goals are clear, it makes student goal-setting, feedback, and self-assessment processes inclusive and accessible because the expectations and processes are not assumed or hidden.
- **Stairs:** As students enter the room, you could make sure to say hello. You might not know the students' names yet, but deliberately saying hello to every single student is a small but meaningful gesture. As students come into the room, you could also let them know how you'd like them to be seated. For many students, the seemingly simple act of determining one's own seat is overwhelming. It can be like entering a social and emotional minefield, which takes away from brain power needed for responsive learning processes. Having a procedure for where to sit, especially on day one, can help minimize stress and lay the groundwork for later inclusive and accessible interaction procedures. Note that establishing procedures for where to sit is different from assigned seats. For example, you could ask students to fill in the back row first and explain that you'll work on seating together later that week. Seating procedures can be co-created with students, which is a way to shift from the learner-manager to learner-empowerer model.

After the bell rang, you greeted your students, another good start. Before digging into the syllabus information, next time you could add a way for students to greet each other, which would begin to lay the groundwork for later collaboration like peer feedback. Instead of reading the syllabus to the students, you could try a jigsaw or other collaboration strategy to engage the students in digesting the syllabus information in pairs or small groups. This would also provide valuable formative information regarding what the students understand and need clarified as well as what their strengths and needs are when it comes to processing information and working with peers. Eventually, you may even consider collaborating with your students to shape sections of the syllabus together, such as fleshing out rules and procedures with a social contract or class constitution, which would also support the shift from learner manager to learner empowerer.

Scenario 2

It's the first day of a new unit in Mrs. McKanney's sixth-grade language arts class, and she wants to gather information about students' current abilities analyzing text so she can differentiate lessons and resources accordingly. As students return from lunch, a pre-assessment is waiting for them on their desks. Mrs. McKanney directs them to have a seat, stop talking, and do their work.

Just like Mr. Sadler, Mrs. McKanney makes several great educator moves, and there is also room for action steps. Before reading our feedback ideas, take a moment to think about what feedback you would give her. Use the same stars-and-stairs feedback prompts from scenario 1.

Here's our feedback for Mrs. McKanney:

- **Stars:** It's wonderful to see that you know pre-assessment information can be incredibly valuable for differentiation and making other instructional decisions. Rather than making unit or lesson-planning choices based on assumptions, you're gathering information about students' strengths and needs, which is part of assessment empowerment principle #1, learner context. Collecting this information is a perfect way to show respect and appreciation, which builds trusting relationships needed for later responsive teaching and processes, such as using teacher or peer feedback. You also had the pre-assessment ready on students' desks. This can help kids transition from one environment to another: in this case, from lunch back to the learning space. Transition cues can help students feel emotionally and socially safe and ready to learn.
- **Stairs:** You clearly know the value of pre-assessment information, but do students? If they don't, the pre-assessment waiting for them on their desk can be scary or stressful, a "gotcha" event, which can undermine the work you're doing to build strong learning environments and relationships. To

minimize stress and gather the best pre-assessment results, you could try telling the class about the assessment process before breaking for lunch. That way they know what to expect when they return. You could engage them in discussion prompts about the pre-assessment. The prompts could elicit students' definitions and reasons for the pre-assessment. They could also clarify how you will and won't use the results. Engaging students in this discussion can be a way to shift from a learner-manager to a learner-empowerer model because you'd be using pre-assessment as a process accomplished with students, not as a process done to students.

Creating the "right conditions for optimum learning"

As Zaretta Hammond explains in her book ***Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain***, "It is our responsibility to create the right conditions for optimum learning." Deliberately and collaboratively creating the right conditions for optimum learning from day one is critical, especially after all we experienced during the pandemic. Relationships are especially critical because, as Hammond adds, "The brain seeks to minimize social threats and maximize opportunities to connect with others in community. [...] Positive relationships keep our safety-threat detection system in check." And the safer we feel, the easier it is for responsive learning processes that positively impact learners and learning to take place.

Each day, including on day one, we can collaborate with our students to make small learning environment and relationship moves that are prudent investments in overall learning success, well-being, and self-efficacy. What moves do you already make? What moves will you try today?

Here are some suggested next steps for individuals or teams:

- **Think of your own day-one scenario.** Use the stars-and-stairs feedback prompts included in this post to think about how to refine the learning environment and relationship moves in your scenario. Try out your refined moves and ask students for their feedback.
- **Ask your students to submit ideas for building nurturing environments and relationships.** Kids often have the best ideas for practicing how to interact and connect. Plus, using students' ideas is another great way to build trust and partnership, not to mention ease your workload.

Each day [...] we can collaborate with our students to make small learning environment and relationship moves that are prudent investments in overall learning success, well-being, and self-efficacy.

- **Ask a trusted colleague to observe you** and your students and provide feedback about learning environments and relationships in your classroom. Use your colleague's feedback to refine your moves.
- **Connect to equity beliefs and practices.** How is collaborating with students to attend to learning environments and relationships a powerful, actionable way to apply equitable beliefs and practices? Think about the equity beliefs you hold, both as an individual and as a school or district, and consider writing them down so it's easier to be intentional in your practice. For ideas on how to document equity beliefs and practices, read our equity statement. **TLG**

More on assessment empowerment: The power of knowing your purpose

Have you ever stopped to note how many decisions you make in a day? It can be as many as 1,500! No wonder you're tired.

Educators' decisions about assessment processes, tools, and data use can become automatic, which helps us consider all our learners' strengths, interests, and needs as quickly as possible. If we don't regularly check our decisions, however, we risk making choices that undermine student learning success, well-being, and self-efficacy. One thing we may not know to check, forget to examine, or become too busy to question is assessment purpose. Assessment processes and tools are essential parts of the responsive teaching and learning cycle, but are we always clear what our assessments are actually meant to do?

Assessment empowerment principle #3, attend to purpose, reminds us to pay close attention to the reason for our assessment processes and tools. If we don't have a clear idea, we can end up over-assessing, under-assessing, or using inaccurate results to inform important decisions. These issues can add to educator and learner fatigue, distrust, and toxic stress, not to mention inequity.

How to approach assessment with intention

We need to ensure that our assessment processes, tools, and data use are part of the responsive learning cycle that fuels learners and learning. To do that, we can partner with colleagues, students, and families to regularly pause and ask three key questions:

1. **What is the purpose?** (Remember that for learner- and learning-centered success, educators and students partner to routinely engage in three main assessment purposes: formative, interim, and summative. Formative processes elicit evidence to inform day-to-day responsive teaching and learning "moves." Interim assessment processes occur at intervals, for example, every 6–8 weeks, and are used to further elicit evidence to inform responsive learning moves. Summative assessment processes are used at or near the end of a learning journey, like at the end of a unit or quarter, to elicit learning evidence that informs determinations such as grade reports, certification of competency, class/course placement, or program improvement.)

2. **Do the assessment and its purpose fit the context, chosen outcome (e.g., learning goal), and placement in the learning cycle, progression, or continuum of development?**

3. **Do the assessment process, tool, and data use match the purpose it was designed to serve?**

Notice that these three questions are deliberately crafted for use at multiple levels of the education ecosystem: classroom, professional learning community (PLC), school, district, and beyond. For a balanced, coherent, and articulated web of assessment processes, tools, and data use that effectively improves learning outcomes, addresses unfinished learning, and closes opportunity gaps, all levels must be involved and aligned. Educational organizations and policymakers need to be aligned, too, so that their actions, resources, and guidance do not create barriers for the other parts of the educational ecosystem.

Examples of intention in action

Let's explore how the three purpose questions can be applied to two scenarios from different levels of the education ecosystem. After demonstrating how to answer the questions, I've included suggested next steps because checking for assessment purpose is a continuous improvement process.

Assessment processes and tools are essential parts of the responsive teaching and learning cycle, but are we always clear what our assessments are actually meant to do?

Scenario 1: PLC example

The members of the eighth-grade ELA PLC at Easton Middle School are collaborating to develop a common formative assessment (CFA) so they can work smarter, not harder, to generate data that can inform how they adjust responsive teaching and learning practices. The current common learning goal of focus is the ELA literacy standard RL.8.2: "Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text."

For the first CFA in the sequence of learning for this goal, the PLC members decide to copy and paste five comprehension questions from the unit summative materials that are provided in the teacher's edition of the district-wide adopted textbook. They agree to each use the five copied-and-pasted questions with their students, gather and analyze data on their responses, and then determine next steps. Here's how they answered the three purpose questions as a team.

1. What is the purpose?

The reason for the CFA is to inform how to adjust instruction and supports as students practice how to analyze the development of theme over the course of a text.

2. Do the assessment and its purpose fit the context, chosen outcome (e.g., learning goal), and placement in the learning cycle, progression, or continuum of development?

No. There's a mismatch between the learning goal (analyzing theme) and what the questions measure (comprehension).

Building and checking for comprehension are certainly necessary steps toward successful theme analysis, but we can't just copy and paste comprehension questions without adjusting them to scaffold up to questions that directly ask about the development of theme. If we don't fix this, we'll go through the CFA process only to find we don't have the data we need to make sure all students are learning and growing in the learning goal of focus.

3. Do the assessment process, tool, and data use match the purpose it was designed to serve?

No. We selected comprehension questions from the end-of-unit summative materials without adjusting for the learning goal (analyzing theme) or the formative purpose (gauge student progress in analyzing theme). The summative questions could certainly inform how to craft or select CFA questions, but they should not be copied, pasted, and used as-is because they were designed and placed in the textbook for summative purpose.

Next steps

Because there's a clear disconnect with the assessment and purpose in this example, the PLC has some work ahead of them. But how much better is it to regroup this early in the process than to realize the assessment data you've spent days, weeks, or longer gathering can't help you gain the understanding or make the decisions you need?

Educators may feel like they must use district- or school-adopted curriculum materials, such as assessments in provided textbooks, as-is, just like the eighth-grade PLC did. But keep in mind that textbook writers must create resources for a broad audience; they do not know your specific students, your learning goal(s) of focus, or when and where the learning goal is placed in your course or class learning journey. In other words, they don't know the best-fit responsive moves; you do. Especially in the formative phases of learning, it is important to check and, if necessary, adjust assessment tasks or processes to ensure a match between assessment purpose and learning goal, timeframe, and scaffolds needed for all students to succeed in demonstrating their abilities. If we don't, we risk operating as though our educators and learners are robots on an assembly line, which can undermine the learner- and learning-centered aim of assessment empowerment. A factory model approach to education used to be the expectation and norm; that is no longer the case.

Scenario 2: Leadership example

At Seaside Elementary, third-graders take MAP® Growth™, NWEA's interim assessment, in the fall, winter, and spring. The district leadership team is working on improving reading instruction, so they use MAP Growth results to evaluate teacher performance.

1. What is the purpose?

We are using MAP Growth to evaluate teacher performance.

2. Do the assessment and its purpose fit the context, chosen outcome (e.g., learning goal), and placement in the learning cycle, progression, or continuum of development?

No. As district leaders, we are working on improving reading instruction, and while MAP Growth measures reading skills, it's very difficult to draw a straight line between teacher instructional practice and student outcomes on a test because there are so many other factors to consider. In addition, we cannot look at a single data point. Are we also looking at a baseline, progress monitoring, feedback, or any other empowering components used in a responsive cycle or progression of teacher skill development? By using MAP Growth in this way, we are taking a leap to an evaluative (summative) use without attention to a continuum of development.

3. Do the assessment process, tool, and data use match the purpose it was designed to serve?

No. MAP Growth was not designed for the purposes of teacher evaluation, according to NWEA's document "Guidance on the use of student test results in teacher evaluation systems."

Next steps

Just like with the PLC group, there's a mismatch in assessment and purpose here. There's also a lot to be gained from slowing down and finding alignment.

District leaders can continue to monitor researchers' most recent reports regarding the best combination of teacher performance measures and read articles like "Measuring teacher effectiveness" by the RAND Corporation. It takes time to find the right blend of processes and tools for teacher evaluation, yet investing time up front to ensure proper purpose will save time, energy, and frustration down the line. Furthermore, ensuring appropriate purpose of teacher performance measures is a powerful way to model assessment empowerment principle #3 for other levels of the education ecosystem; your leadership actions with assessment purpose will speak louder than words.

Moving forward

I don't know about you, but checking assessment processes, tools, and data use for alignment to purpose was not something I was taught to do in my teacher preparation program, nor was it a topic of professional development until I was well into my career. I wish I had known about all of this many years ago. I could have saved so many hours of teacher and student frustration and even toxic stress!

I cannot go back and change those decisions, but moving forward I can commit to checking for purpose and supporting others to do the same. If you're not sure how to go about this work, ask for help from an instructional coach, special education specialist, or assessment for learning leader. Know that once you practice checking for purpose mismatches in more formal, planned assessments, like in the example earlier, you'll create new habits that can help you make quick, well-informed, and aligned decisions about in-the-moment assessments, too. And why not involve your students in this process? What a great way to empower them to build self-efficacy and share the weight of this hard work.

[C]hecking assessment processes, tools, and data use for alignment to purpose was not something I was taught to do in my teacher preparation program, nor was it a topic of professional development until I was well into my career.

Here are some questions to get you started thinking about all of this and how it applies to your school or classroom:

- In what ways do I already partner with colleagues to check the purpose of assessment processes, tools, and data use?
- How do I talk about assessment purpose with my students and their families in ways that emphasize learner- and learning-empowering reasons and benefits (instead of compliance-driven reasons and consequences)?
- What is an example of one assessment process, tool, or data use I can check for purpose right now? How can I partner with others to do so? **TLG**

Assessment empowerment principle #4: Responsive learning cycles

One of the biggest lessons I learned about assessment empowerment in my classroom is that it doesn't just require learning new practices. I also needed to recognize and shift the parts of my existing approach that just weren't working.

Reflecting on what isn't effective is tough. A lot of what we do in the classroom every day is what we've been taught to do. It's comfortable and it's familiar. But as we commit ourselves to assessment empowerment, we must stop and examine all our approaches. Do my plans actually move learning forward? Or am I just marching through content?

We can all find some opportunities for improvement. Embrace them! They definitely don't mean you're bad at what you do (because you're not. How do I know? Because you're reading this post, and probably long after—or long before—school hours). Look at them as opportunities instead, opportunities to begin learning about and leveraging responsive learning cycles, the fourth principle of assessment empowerment.

What frustration taught me

Consider the following example from early in my teaching career: As a ninth-grade ELA teacher, my curriculum map included using Homer's *Odyssey* to teach literature knowledge and skills. I assigned students pages to read. We proceeded through reading activities, such as comprehension warm-ups and analysis exercises. I administered quizzes, and then I counted up the points from the quizzes to assign grades.

All these years later, I know that I was perpetuating a teach, test, grade model left over from 19th and 20th century educational paradigms. But I didn't know that at the time. I wasn't trained to view human-centered components or assessment purposes and practices—including grading—as parts of a whole, integrated process that fuels learners and learning. I viewed and used assessments as discrete events, and I applied them to learners rather than engaging in processes *with* learners. Students were frustrated, of course, and so was I. No one was enjoying the *Odyssey* as much as it should be enjoyed and, in a lot of ways, I was just helping kids develop an aversion to classic literature.

What I came to see as the key was understanding the difference between learner manager and learner empowerer. The principles of assessment empowerment guide us to be learner empowerers, and I wasn't following many of them well. I

didn't partner with my students; I "did activities": loosely related content and skill exercises that did not strategically leverage learner context, build relationships, or have a clear purpose aligned to a specific learning goal and progression. Unfortunately this teach, test, grade model—"learner manager" defined—is still quite common, and it undermines learning success, well-being, and self-efficacy.

How to empower students with responsive learning cycles

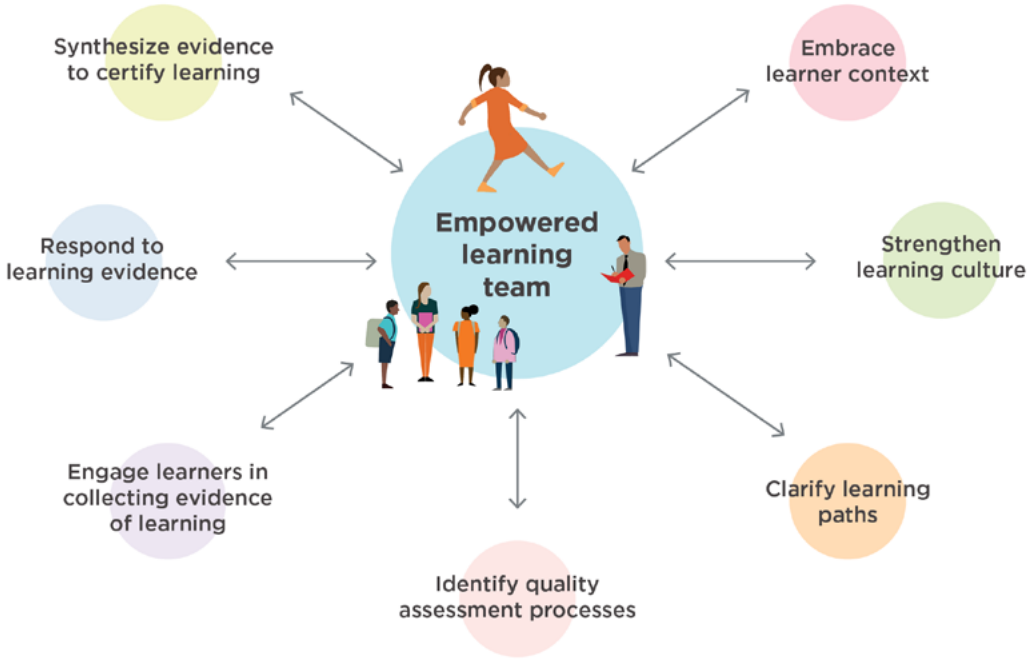
Responsive learning cycles are comprised of quality, human-centered, goal-driven processes, practices, and tools that fuel agency and success for all students. These cycles can and should be used to inform big-picture issues, such as district, school, and classroom assessment ecosystems, as well as day-to-day practices, including teacher and student learning routines.

We can begin a responsive learning cycle by merely asking the right kinds of questions. The answers help us start to outline our approach.

- **Who are the learners?**
  Embrace learner context.
- **How do we learn together?**
  Strengthen learning culture.
- **What are we learning and why? How do we get there and beyond?**
  Clarify learning and paths.
- **How will we practice, monitor, and certify learning?**
  Identify quality assessment processes.
- **How do we engage in feedback processes and collect evidence?**
  Engage learners in collecting evidence of learning.
- **What does the feedback or evidence tell us? How do we respond?**
  Respond to learning evidence.
- **Where are we now, and what's next?**
  Synthesize evidence to make learning and communication decisions.

The following graphic details what this looks like.

The responsive teaching and learning cycle



The questions and answers here are not new; they build on long-established assessment literacy and formative assessment scholarship. Working with them in the larger context of assessment empowerment and all its principles, however, helps us ensure those human-centered components and assessment purposes and practices I mentioned earlier are woven together as one, not handled separately or in opposition. When we lack cohesion, the hard work of day-to-day learning routines can become undone with a cluster of unaligned activities, disconnected summative events, or contradictory grading habits. We can save time and energy as well as increase learning success, well-being, and self-efficacy if we use responsive teaching and learning cycles.

To explore each part of a responsive teaching and learning cycle, let's use that example from early in my career. Come with me as I go back in time for a do-over. For each question-and-answer prompt, I made a planning note-to-self that includes concrete ways I could engage with my ninth-grade students as we used the *Odyssey* to grow in literature knowledge and skills. I also documented outcomes and benefits.

Sample responsive learning cycle (RLC) analysis

Unit: Using the *Odyssey* to teach literature knowledge and skills

RLC QUESTION + ANSWER	PLANNING NOTES	OUTCOME	OUTCOME BENEFITS
Who are the learners? ***View and use learner context as assets***	• I will use a pre-reading inventory about learners' strengths, interests, funds of knowledge, and needs related to the content (poetry, Greek history, mythology, hero's journey) and skills (comprehension, analysis). • I will use their responses to structure daily warm-ups and inform decisions about reading exercise choices.	A set of questions that's useful and built on students' interests and needs	A time-saving investment in motivation
How do we learn together? ***Attend to learning environments and relationships***	• I will partner with learners to co-craft a reading discussion protocol* that supports shared responsibilities and respectful disagreement. • I will include a protocol check-in during our discussion debrief and have learners help make adjustments as needed.	A routine for literature discussions based on student input	More focus and fewer behavior management issues
What are we learning and why? How do we get there and beyond? ***Use clear learning goals, purposes, and paths***	• I will work with my professional learning community to identify a large-grain goal priority (e.g., literature standard). • I will examine this goal to break it down into a success route: What will it look like to approach the goal? Hit it? Excel past it? • What scaffolds, differentiation, and tiers of supports will be needed? • I will share the goal and path with my students and engage them in helping me translate both into their own words and propose alternate paths. • I will regularly use the goal and path with learners, supports, and caregivers to monitor progress and celebrate success.	A visible path for success	Minimized confusion and frustration
How will we practice, monitor, and certify learning? ***Select or design quality assessment methods and tools***	• After examining the large-grain goal priority (e.g., literature standard), I will use classroom assessment quality guidance to ensure planned methods and tools align to the goal and are as bias-free as possible. • I will refine or create methods and tools as needed. • I will share the quality guidance with learners so they can help propose or design methods and tools (and save teacher time!).	Assessment processes clearly aligned to a goal	Clarity and fairness, which contribute to engagement

Sample responsive learning cycle (RLC) analysis

Unit: Using the *Odyssey* to teach literature knowledge and skills

RLC QUESTION + ANSWER	PLANNING NOTES	OUTCOME	OUTCOME BENEFITS
How do we engage in feedback processes and collect evidence? ***Use methods and tools to elicit learning evidence***	• I know my learners usually need feedback and structured practice with verbal or written literature comprehension and analysis tasks. I will choose a task and feedback strategy, such as Two Stars and a Wish, that fits my learners. • I will budget class time to practice the strategy three times before a summative process, so learners can show they can do the task alone.	Time for practice, feedback, and self-assessment	Student self-efficacy, which leads to less time spent on comments students don't use or grades without meaning
What does the feedback or evidence tell us? How do we respond? ***Analyze, act on, and respond to learning evidence***	• I will ensure feedback and task protocol time includes practicing how to use feedback to improve tasks. • I will use strategies, such as My Favorite No, to model how to celebrate what's working and take next steps that move learning forward toward a goal.		
Where are we now, and what's next? ***Synthesize evidence to make learning and communication decisions***	• I will use the learning path to engage students in self-assessment throughout the learning journey so that by the time we get to the end of the *Odyssey*, they can use the path to identify their level of knowledge and skill on any summative assessments and make a personal goal for the next literature goals we tackle together. • I will make notes on students' final self-assessment so they can communicate learning and next steps at home. • I will use student self-assessment to inform my grading and help learners and their families know what the grades mean.		

Give yourself grace

I want to be clear: no one is expecting you to tackle every part of a responsive teaching and learning cycle all at once or to excel at the practice right away. That's just not possible! My shift to using them so I can become a 21st-century learner empowerer has taken time, includes a lot of productive struggle, and is ongoing.

I recommend starting with one part, the one that makes the most sense for your professional learning journey. Take time and practice it *with* your students before taking on the next part. As needed, refer back to the last column of the table above, the outcomes you can expect. That will bolster you if you're feeling fatigued and remind you what you're doing all of this for.

Here are a few additional prompts to help you shift away from a teach, test, grade model. Remember to be kind to yourself and to explore your answers slowly and when you're realistically able.

- What is a responsive teaching and learning cycle?
- How do you already partner with your students in one or more parts of a responsive teaching and learning cycle?
- What is at least one benefit of using the parts of a responsive teaching and learning cycle as one integrated whole, rather than separate events?
- How can a responsive teaching and learning cycle help you shift from a learner-manager model to a learner-empowerer model?
- What's at least one part of the responsive teaching and learning cycle you could introduce into your practice or begin to refine this week? **TLG**

We can save time and energy as well as increase learning success, well-being, and self-efficacy if we use responsive teaching and learning cycles.

Last but not least: The role of communication in assessment empowerment

What does it mean to communicate *with* learners and their families? When I first started teaching, I thought it just meant providing information; in retrospect, I can see that I was talking *at* them. I eventually learned the critical difference: communicating *with* students and caregivers means making sure exchanges are learner- and learning-centered, that is, inclusive, accessible, and meaningful.

This change from communication actions directed *at* learners and caregivers to communication actions exchanged *with* learners and caregivers is another component of the shift from being a learner manager to being a learner empowerer. And that makes communication the fifth—and last—principle of assessment empowerment.

The difference talking *with*, not *at*, students makes

As a secondary teacher, I was trained to be a content specialist, an omniscient being who (supposedly!) knew all the learning information, steps, and results that needed to be communicated out to students and their caregivers. I was also magically supposed to know *how* to communicate all of this effectively.

I did not know until well into my career that learner success, well-being, and self-efficacy are far more likely if there is an exchange of communication *with* all the members of the learning team. Instead of working by myself to convey information *to* students and caregivers, I learned to use collaborative exchanges *with* them, allowing everyone to be much better informed and make more effective, responsive, and empowering learning decisions.

Here is an example of what this difference can look like in action: Early in my career, at the beginning of the school year or semester, I would send home the class syllabus and direct students to give the document to a caregiver and ask the adult to read and sign it. Students would then return it to me. Later in my career, after I learned more about becoming a learner empowerer, students and I would digest class information together starting on the first day. That would put us in a great place to co-create classroom learning agreements, such as a social contract or class constitution. Students would then take this co-created information to an adult, review the information with them, and ask the adult to add an idea or question. Back in class, we would use those ideas and questions to refine our agreements. We then used them to guide our collaboration as a learning team.

How to go from monologue to dialogue

Of course you need to share a certain amount of class, course, or program information with students and caregivers. Your textbook and attendance policies may be decided by your district, for example, and some rules related to conduct, especially during COVID-19, may be set by your school. But, as I learned the hard way, merely sending information out doesn't mean I communicated it in an inclusive, meaningful, or accessible way that could be understood and applied. It doesn't matter how many signatures I got on a document. This approach usually resulted in the type of frustration most of us have experienced at one point or another. You know the scenario I'm talking about: A student or caregiver asks a question. The teacher growls, "It's in the syllabus!" Not productive. Not empowering (for anyone, frankly). Not conducive to learning.

When I shifted to engaging *with* students and caregivers in processing learning information, steps, or results together—first in class and then with a bite-sized collaborative action with a caregiver or other adult outside of class—frustration decreased, and productive engagement, learning success, and self-efficacy increased. There was greater understanding of policies, even those made by school or district leaders, because there was active discussion for the reasons behind the guidelines. It also became much simpler to engage in responsive teaching and learning practices, such as peer feedback and self-assessment, because we had already nurtured the conditions and routines for collaborative exchanges of information. These actions nurture listening, clarity, and collaboration, so they also align with trauma-informed practices.

[C]ommunicating *with* students and caregivers means making sure exchanges are learner- and learning-centered, that is, inclusive, accessible, and meaningful.

As you get started on this work, consider that how this change takes place in a classroom depends quite a bit on the grade level. At the same time, don't underestimate how ready for this kind of collaboration kids as young as first and second grade probably are. Here's a more detailed exploration of what I did in my middle and high school classes to make this more collaborative type of communication happen.

1. Replace "I" with "we"

How I did this: Just thinking about switching from talking at people to talking *with* them was a critical starting point for me. I started using the word "we" a lot!

Why I did this: After adjusting those tiny yet mighty words—"I" and "we"—it was easier to slowly but surely figure out how to shift my communication practices overall away from learner-manager directives to learner-empowerer exchanges.

2. Process learning information with students beginning on the first day

How I did this: On the very first day of class, my students and I would look at learning goals and processes for the year and begin to talk about what kinds of things we would like to have shared agreements on, like how to take turns speaking, the process for taking brain breaks, and pronoun usage. We would also take the opportunity to understand the reasons behind larger decisions made by school or district leaders as well as identify opportunities for voice and choice along the learning journey.

Why I did this: To immediately support student understanding, establish routines for their ongoing active contributions and self-efficacy, and prepare them to share the information *with* a support person at home in an inclusive, accessible, and meaningful way.

3. Collaborate with students on shared agreements during the first week

How I did this: Instead of reading the syllabus to the students, I used the jigsaw technique or another collaborative formative assessment strategy to engage pairs or small groups in digesting the syllabus information, especially non-negotiable expectations such as safety and respect. After debriefing the jigsaw, I directed their attention to the class-agreements portion of the information. In their pairs or small groups, students would write down examples of actions that would support everyone's success, well-being, and self-efficacy. Next, the students would circle the top two ideas. I then prompted them to take the information and their ideas to a trusted adult, review the information, and have the adult add two more action ideas. Lastly, the students brought back the ideas so we could choose the best actions together. The actions were then posted in the learning space so we could use and update them as needed throughout the year.

Why I did this: To support the members of the learning team to be active rather than passive participants in a bite-sized way; to encourage students to translate the information and task into the mode or language that was best for their adult, which helps ensure inclusivity and accessibility; and to establish critical foundations for success in later responsive learning routines, such as feedback and sharing progress.

[L]earner success, well-being, and self-efficacy are far more likely if there is an exchange of communication with all the members of the learning team.

4. Ask students to share learning information with the right adult support person throughout the year

How I did this: Early in the school year, I gave students the option of engaging in our initial learning information with a caregiver or any other adult in their life who acted as a mentor or was otherwise a support person. They would ask this adult to add feedback or a question. Later in the term, I created opportunities

for students to share work in progress with adults at home. For example, after practicing peer feedback or self-assessment in class, I would prompt students to share their draft with their support person, once again seeking feedback or a question. Students would then return to class with feedback or questions we could use to further refine skills or better understand the learning goal and routes for success.

Why I did this: We all do better when we have people in our corner, but not all students have a caregiver who is available to talk about school information with them. For various reasons, such as work schedules, houselessness, or custody situations, some students need to engage and connect with a coach, counselor, pastor, or other adult instead of the caregiver who is legally responsible for them. By providing these options and investing in this exchange, I also learned valuable learner context information, my students and I were able to build trusting relationships, and the whole learning team was informed to make responsive teaching and learning decisions throughout the school year.

Note that there are lots of other ways to go about strengthening communication exchanges with learners and caregivers. I particularly love these three articles from Edutopia that focus on how to build a strong collaboration between you, your students, and the adults who support them outside of the classroom: "Getting to know your students in a million words or less," "How student-led conferences center the learning journey," and "Teacher-parent communication strategies to start the year off right."

Moving forward

As you know, there are multiple layers of communication in an educational ecosystem. In this post, I gave examples of the classroom level of the ecosystem, but I encourage you to consider how the same kind of thinking and action can make an impact at other levels. For example, how can educators at the school, district, and even state level of the ecosystem shift from communicating *at* learners and caregivers to engaging in communication exchanges *with* learners and caregivers? This ecosystem-wide shift in communication is necessary to reinforce our hard work and the hard work of colleagues, students, and caregivers.

If you haven't done so already, I recommend choosing one action step that can help shift systems and practices from learning communication directed *at* learners and caregivers to engaging in learning communication *with* students and caregivers. To help you decide on an action step, here are some prompts for further thinking and discussion.

- How do I actively listen to students and their caregivers to make informed, affirming decisions? Name at least two ways.
- What's an example of a time I communicated at students instead of *with* them? What's one thing I could have done differently to foster more collaborative communication?
- In what ways are my students engaged as active agents in my assessment communication processes? Name at least two ways.
- What's one more way I can engage my students as active agents in my assessment communication processes?
- What's one way I can share my communication successes *with* an educator who serves as a school, district, or state leader? **TLG**

About the author

Erin Beard

Erin Beard has more than 17 years of practice as a secondary teacher-leader in southern Oregon, where she lives with her partner, three children, four cats, and one dog. Erin is a content design coordinator for NWEA and received her DEd in educational methods, policy, and leadership from the University of Oregon in 2020. Her dissertation explored the intersection of student-involved assessment for learning, equity, and trauma-informed practices. She currently collaborates with her NWEA colleagues to generate professional learning experiences and thought leadership in the areas of responsive teaching and learning, student goal setting, and quality classroom assessment.

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