Assessment *for* Learning: A Teacher's Story

PREL

Pacific Resources for Education and Learning

Building Capacity Through Education

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Hannah's Story

In a Pacific island village, there was a grade 1 teacher who loved her students very much. Her name was Hannah. She was young and eager to become the best teacher she could be. A teacher in the grade 1 classroom next to her was very experienced. Hannah believed she could learn a great deal from her. The older teacher was very organized and had many fine materials on the walls for the children to enjoy. Hannah decided she wanted to be just like the teacher next door.

She approached this teacher and asked if she could observe her language arts class. The teacher welcomed Hannah into her classroom. Hannah watched as the students quietly obeyed the teacher, often reciting stories in unison and completing worksheets. At the end of the school day, the teacher turned to the next story in the reader and prepared for tomorrow's lesson.

"This is a good class," Hannah thought. "The teacher is in charge and well prepared. Everybody is learning together. I need to teach like this."

Hannah tried to be like the teacher next door but it just wasn't working. When she taught the whole class in the same way, she knew she was not reaching every child. Hannah had been raised by her extended family to recognize that each child is unique. At home they had provided many one-on-one learning experiences for Hannah and her brothers and sisters. Part of Hannah's upbringing included observing and listening to her elders and then practicing what she observed—a way of learning from others that involved many conversations between members of her extended family and her. Hannah brought these ideals to the classroom, yet they seemed to be in conflict with the ways of teaching in the classroom next door. Every day at school, Hannah observed the students in her class perform. As she shared personal stories with her students, she listened thoughtfully to the stories they told. She wanted to know each child's interests and what they could do in the various classroom activities she organized for them. Learning about the children was how she knew what to plan for her next day's lesson.

She would often sit with the children, one at a time, and talk with them about their learning. When she met with Antinam, she pointed out four words that he struggled with. She had recalled him having difficulty remembering these words over the past week. Hannah knew these words were often used in the stories they were reading in class—words he just needed to know.

Because of the conversations and the group work, her classroom often seemed noisy. The students loved to talk about what they were reading. She valued learning about her students but was uncomfortable that her class was not as quiet as the one next door. Those students always seemed to be busy doing their work. Hannah came to recognize that the sound of students busily engaging in their work is "productive noise."

As the end of the quarter drew near and the children were preparing to be tested, she worried. "What if my students don't do very well on the tests? What have I taught them? What have they learned? I should have made them be quiet so they would do more work."

The tests were given. Sure enough, the teacher next door had some of the highest scores; she also had most of the lowest. Hannah's class performed well. More importantly, Hannah knew they were excited about reading.

Hannah learned that what is perceived as good teaching is not always so. Spending time to get to know her students and their individual needs and then acting on that information is what allowed her to become the best teacher she could be.

What Is Assessment for Learning?

This brief overview of assessment for learning is designed to familiarize Pacific teachers with classroom assessment and its link to teaching in support of student learning and growth. Hannah's story is shared to facilitate beginning conversations that center around teachers getting to know the needs and interests of each student in their early literacy classroom.

Many teachers like Hannah have come to realize that taking time to reflect on what they do as early literacy teachers leads to improved prac-

tices and student growth. They question what students are doing in print literacy events, which teaching practices seem to be working, and where curriculum and teaching are headed.

Teachers build into their practices opportunities to observe, record, and collect evidence of actual student performance in early literacy, and then talk with each student. They explore together what was simultaneously observed by the teacher and experienced by the student. Teachers are encouraged to provide multiple opportunities for students to perform early literacy tasks and engage in self-assessment activities. These pieces of "evidence" can be placed in a portfolio of student literacy learning.

Effective teachers know and then teach to the needs and interests of students in their classrooms. This is called assessment *for* learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Stiggins, 2002).
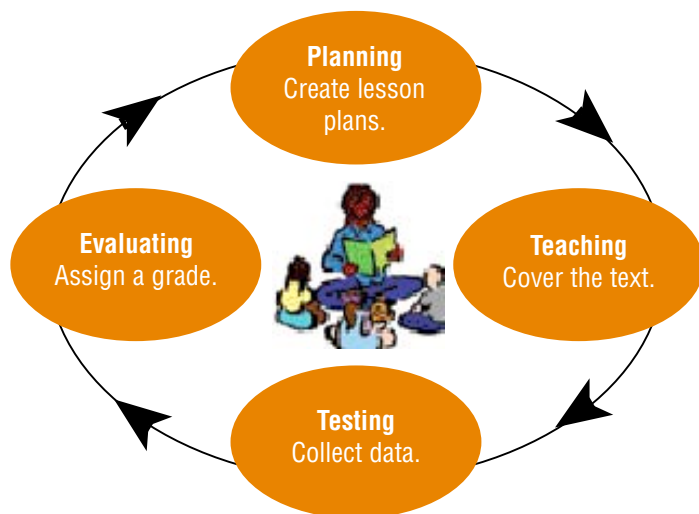
The Teacher Next Door

In Hannah's story, the teacher next door is guided by what is called the Traditional Teaching Cycle (TTC). Teachers who use this approach begin with and focus on planning:

- First, they **plan** the lesson.
- Then, they **teach** the lesson.
- Next, they **test** the students on the lesson.
- Finally, they **evaluate** the students by giving each one a grade.

The purpose of the TTC (see Figure 1) is to make sure that teachers cover the curriculum given to them by the school. The topics and themes are usually linked to the calendar; that is, planning is organized on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis and focuses on a certain topic. Typically, teachers begin their planning by mapping content (the lessons) onto the calendar. Teaching is usually *whole class,* in which all students cover the same material at the same time. Testing follows instruction. Testing is a form of assessment that is meant to find out if the students learned what was taught and if the teacher taught what is being tested. Teachers are responsible for

Figure 1. The Traditional Teaching Cycle (TTC)

- **Planning** — Create lesson plans.
- **Teaching** — Cover the text.
- **Testing** — Collect data.
- **Evaluating** — Assign a grade.

teaching—presenting information—and students are responsible for learning it. This is called assessment *of* learning (Stiggins, 2002).

In the TTC, assessment work focuses on evaluation of the students. Teachers usually use a grade book to record numbers (e.g., 8 out of 10) and letters (e.g., A, B, C+) to reflect their evaluation of the students.
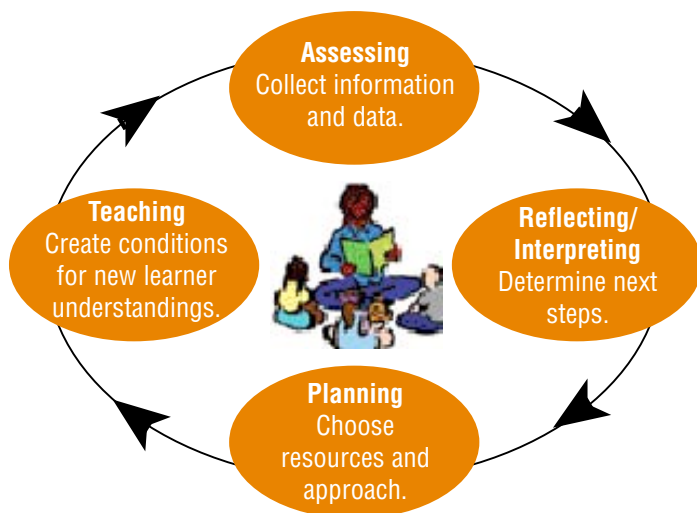
At Hannah's school, the teachers are expected to prepare students for end-of-quarter testing. This is typical of the TTC, where testing and evaluating come *after* planning and teaching.

Hannah's Classroom

In Hannah's classroom, there is a different approach to teaching and learning. Hannah is guided by what is called the Teaching Learning Cycle (TLC) (Herzog, 1997). In this approach, the focus is on student learning, not planning. The pace is determined by the rate of student learning, not by the calendar.

The TLC is fundamentally different from the TTC; it is a different way of thinking about teaching and of being in the classroom with children. The TLC (see Figure 2) starts with a focus on assessment.

Figure 2. The Teaching Learning Cycle (TLC)

Assessing Collect information and data.

Reflecting/ Interpreting Determine next steps.

Planning Choose resources and approach.

Teaching Create conditions for new learner understandings.

Hannah wanted to know her students better; that is, she wanted to learn more about their literacy and interests. She observed them, talked with them, and had them perform different literacy tasks. She *started* with assessment.

Teachers like Hannah are thinking about their work differently.

- First, they **assess** or get to know the literacy needs and interests of each student in their classroom.
- Then, they **reflect** on and **interpret** the information.
- Next, they **plan** lessons based on the needs and interests of the students.
- Finally, they **teach** according to the students' needs and interests.

This is called assessment *for* learning. It means that teachers are continually noting the changing literacy needs of their students and then acting on that information.

As they think about those needs, teachers may group students, selecting appropriate materials for each group. Students switch groups regularly to meet their changing needs. This is called differentiated instruction and flexible grouping.

Hannah realizes that effective teachers take responsibility for creating the conditions in which students learn best. Assessment becomes a necessary and ongoing part of teaching and learning in which both teachers and students share the responsibility for learning.

Hannah Learns Her Students' Needs and Interests

Hannah learns her students' literacy needs and interests by using the three pillars of assessment (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Three Pillars of Assessment

Performance

Conversation

Assessment
for
Learning

Observation
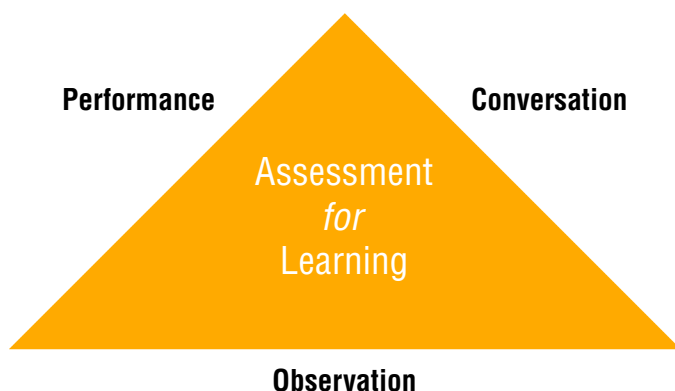
Performance

Hannah creates opportunities for her students to demonstrate what they can do in various areas of print literacy (e.g., book handling skills, alphabet recognition, phonological and phoneme awareness, sight words, vocabulary, oral reading, retelling, writing).

Observation

She watches her students carefully as they complete various literacy activities and then records what she has observed. She tries to do this with each student at least once every 2 weeks.

Conversation

Hannah organizes a schedule to meet with each of her students at least once every 2 weeks to talk about what she has observed and to hear the student's perceptions of their own performance and learning in literacy activities. As they talk, they discuss a specific focus of work for the student.

What does it mean to do classroom assessment?

Assessing (to sit beside) refers to a process of collecting and recording student data that provides teachers with information about teaching and learning. Although classroom assessment takes many forms and is managed in a variety of ways, two features are constant: assessment is an *ongoing process*, and it is a *collection of student information*. Teachers investigate learning, gathering evidence to illustrate not only that students are learning, but what and how they are learning.

Student needs and interests should be an integral aspect of curriculum and instruction. Curriculum frameworks and their standards must be flexible enough to integrate the needs and interests of the students, if they are different from the stated expectations of schools.

Experiences in teaching and assessing should provide students opportunities to demonstrate decision making and critical thinking, develop insight that is not predetermined, and expand their knowledge base. Teachers who believe that teaching and assessing is authentic and purposeful find ways to integrate a balance—meeting student needs and interests while covering essential aspects of the curriculum. This includes, but is not limited to, aspects anticipated in external assessments (e.g., unit tests, end-of-quarter tests, statewide tests).

Activities in Hannah's Classroom

Hannah was doing what is called alternative assessment. This refers to any type of assessment that is different from the traditional stimulus-response model typified by one-answer, multiple-choice tests found on teacher-created and standardized examinations (Wiggins, 1993).

Within alternative assessment, Hannah was engaged in "authentic" assessment. This refers to tasks that are real and meaningful in the daily lives of learners. It also describes assessment that reflects student learning, achievement, motivation, and attitudes on *instructionally relevant* classroom activities. Some examples of authentic assessment are performance assessment, portfolio assessment, and student self-assessment.

- *Performance assessment* refers to any type of assessment that provides opportunities for students to demonstrate what they know, putting what they have learned into a meaningful context. They are assessments that gather evidence of valued performance such as retelling a story, predicting a story's ending, or writing a story.
- *Portfolio assessment* is based on a purposeful collection of student work that is intended to show change over time. The portfolio may

include samples of student work, usually selected by the student or by the student and teacher during individual student conferences, to represent learning. It is a way of collecting information intentionally and systematically over time to reflect student growth and can be discussed in relation to desired expectations of performance. Student work samples might show the *process* of how they learned and the *products* of what they learned.

- *Student self-assessment* encourages student reflection, necessary to gain increased confidence in the performance of tasks. It encourages students to think about the purpose of the task and to reflect on what and how much they are learning. Self-assessment can be encouraged through the use of dialogue journals, learning logs, checklists of interests, and skill or knowledge awareness.

Evidence of learning is an indication of the actual level of performance. The evidence is then interpreted relative to some desired or referenced level of performance (standard). Teachers take action to reduce the gap between the actual performance and the standard. The feedback given to students should indicate what they are to do next to improve learning. It is important for students to understand and act on the feedback.

The purpose of classroom assessment is to help teachers and students understand what students can do now (their current performance) and where students are headed (their desired level or standard); it also supports teachers in mapping pathways that show students how to reach their goals (Stiggins, 2002; Wiliam, 2001). Black and Wiliam (1998) contend that formative uses of assessment are essential components of effective teaching and learning.

Lessons Learned

Although Hannah is a new teacher and has had very little experience in the classroom, she brought her own ways of learning to her work. Hannah has

learned many important lessons:

- Teachers must know the students in their classrooms. After they learn and document students' needs and interests, teachers should reflect on that information.
- Teachers should create conditions in the classroom that encourage meaningful teacher-student interaction, conversation, and group work.
- Teachers need to distinguish between "productive" and "less productive" classroom noise.
- Teachers should use classroom assessment for learning. The TLC can work successfully within a school-based TTC model.
- Everyone should take risks. Hannah was willing to risk not being like the teacher next door in order to follow what she believed was a necessary part of her work—getting to know all of her students individually in her classroom and planning activities to meet their needs.

Remember, assessment practices are meant to be respectful and support students, not degrade or punish them. Assessment information must be honest, understandable, useful, and culturally meaningful to all who use it. But most importantly, it must be beneficial to students.

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