

Assessment Reimagined

Shifting the ‘Who, What, When, Where, How and Why’ of Assessment

Done well, assessment can spark the deepest kind of learning. Yet narrow definitions of assessment persist in education. **Mara Krechevsky** and **Tina Blythe** explore how Project Zero is reimagining assessment and share examples of assessment practices that foster learning for both students and teachers.

‘What does learning look like?’ is one of the key questions Project Zero (PZ) has explored for much of its 50-year history. In recent years, our work has been equal parts grappling with the thorny reality of schools and bureaucratic systems on the one hand, and trying to imagine ‘What if... What other possibilities might there be?’ on the other. One form this work takes is developing alternatives to traditional notions of assessment and accountability and expanding what ‘counts’ as learning



in classrooms and schools. Because the way learning is assessed directly influences what gets taught, assessment is an especially powerful lever for transforming teaching and learning.

PZ researchers have investigated questions of assessment in a variety of research projects and, from these investigations, produced many resources that offer alternative ways of conceptualising and enacting assessment, including the *Arts Propel* handbooks, *The Teaching for Understanding Guide*, *Making Learning Visible*, *Making Thinking Visible*, and many more. (For related resources, see *Additional Reading* at the end of this article and <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/50th/assessment-reimagined>.)

Of course, PZ is only one of many centres and organisations that have worked on these issues over the years, and we have collaborated with a number of them, including EL Education (formerly Expeditionary Learning), educators from the preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, the Educational Testing Service, state departments of education and numerous schools and school districts.

Taken as a whole, this collective work on assessment invites a reimagining of the ‘who, what, when, where, how and why’ of assessment. This reimagining involves four fundamental shifts.

| Assessment Reimagined: Four Fundamental Shifts | |
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| FROM | TO |
| Assessment driven by what can be easily quantified | Assessment driven by the most important goals for student growth and learning, whether those goals can be quantified or not (the ‘why’) |
| Assessment done to teachers and students | Teachers and students as protagonists in the assessment process (the ‘who’) |
| Assessment of a final product at the end of a learning experience | Assessment of process as well as product, integral to the learning experience (the ‘what’ and ‘when’) |
| Assessment as a one-on-one activity (teacher assesses student; principal assesses teacher) | Assessment as a collective and relationship-building process that happens in context (in classrooms, faculty meetings, etc.) (the ‘how’ and ‘where’) |

As illustrations of these shifts, consider two examples from public (UK state) school classrooms in the US, one primary and one secondary:

Example 1: Joan Soble, Secondary School English Literature Teacher

One semester, as Advanced Placement (AP) English teacher Joan Soble gets to know her 11th and 12th grade students (age 16-17), she is struck by the sorts of public figures they voice admiration for. ‘We live in a culture that confuses ‘celebrity’ with ‘greatness’, Joan reflects. She wonders: Do her students understand this difference? Joan decides this is an important topic to focus on with them—especially given how their understanding of greatness might influence their future aspirations as they move beyond high school. Joan

formulates the central question with which she wants students to engage (What do we mean by 'greatness?'), chooses a reading and plans for the class to discuss it in both small and large groups.

In the large high school in which Joan teaches, AP courses are open to any student who elects to take them. As a result, Joan's students reflect a broad range of learners with diverse perspectives, which she expects to emerge as they discuss the complex topic of greatness. She hopes this will become a good opportunity for students to listen thoughtfully to differences of opinion and work through them to achieve consensus about the definition of greatness.

Class conversations pose challenges almost immediately. The students all hold different points of view—which Joan feels has the potential to generate meaningful learning conversations—but the students seem more interested in expounding on their own perspectives than on really listening to those of others. Could class consensus on 'greatness' be reached (as Joan and a number of the students hoped)? Was that even a desirable goal?



Concerned about the nature of the group's conversation, Joan decides to consult with her colleagues who meet regularly to share and discuss student work. She brings a videotape of the class discussion, along with excerpts from the students' written reflections to the group's next meeting and asks her colleagues to use a protocol (or structured conversation) to give her feedback.

Listening to her colleagues' feedback, Joan realizes not only that consensus among her students might not be possible, but also that it might not be that important. As a result, she



shifts her focus in the classroom to helping students engage more deeply with one another's thinking. After making adjustments to her approach over the course of a few weeks, she again brings more documentation back to her teacher-colleagues for examination in the context of a protocol.

Her colleagues' reflections on the video clips of class discussion confirm Joan's initial impression—the students are still voicing arguments about their own views, but the tenor of the conversation has changed. They seem to be arguing more for the sake of understanding one another's thinking than for the sake of 'winning'.

To double-check her colleagues' interpretations, Joan brings a video clip of the teachers' conversation back to her classroom and shows it to the students, asking them whether, in their opinion, the teachers' interpretations of their learning are accurate.

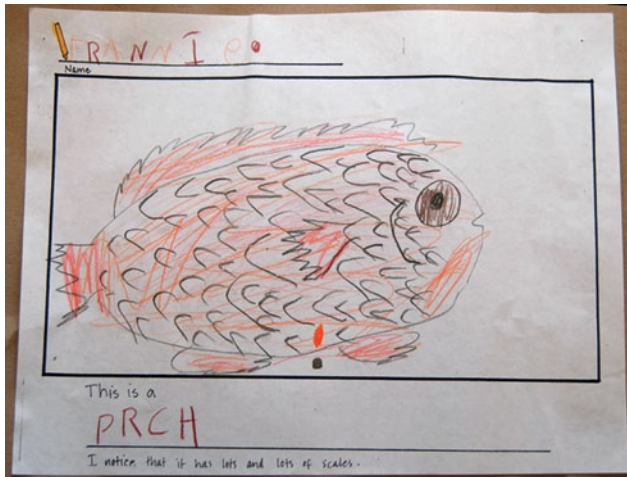
Students share their reflections on their learning as well as on the experience of watching the group of teachers interpret their learning.

- Owen: For an AP class, this went so far. This class taught me how to think ... It was so much more than test prep.
- Liam: ... Like someone [a teacher] said on the video, we really did come to care about greatness.
- Violet: What also happens is that teachers want you to come to a common definition or a consensus about something, and since that's what the teacher wants, people's thinking gets lost.
- Thalia: I felt like I could have my opinion. I had to think about other people's opinions, but I could express my opinions and still keep them...

Joan also shares her final reflection with the class:

'... That's what I had to learn from you guys. I started the term thinking we could come to some consensus about greatness. The real goal was to have

everyone really know what they thought, and what everyone else thought and why—so everyone had to think about everyone else’s thinking before being sure about their own. So even though we have no consensus, I feel very happy about where we ended up, because all of you really understood what each other thought and why.’



Example 2: Melissa Tonachel, Kindergarten Teacher

Kindergarten teacher Melissa Tonachel is leading her 5-year-old students in a study of ocean life. Her goals include helping students learn observation and observational drawing. As children in small groups draw sketches of an ocean perch donated by the local fishmonger, Melissa notices that only a few students actually look at the fish. Some children start to draw before even glancing at it.

Another important learning goal Melissa holds for her students is helping them become thoughtful collaborators who learn with and from one another. She suspects that, with practice, the children could become more effective than she in supporting one another to create more satisfying visual representations. So she decides to take the opportunity to help children build a habit of collaborative, positive critique instead of competitive comparison. She gathers the children together to look at the drawings and asks three questions:

- What do you notice in a drawing that reminds you exactly of how the fish looked?
- What details did someone include that are very important?
- Is there something in someone else’s drawing that you wish you had included in your own?

The conversation is respectful and generative. As children begin work on their second fish drawing, they start to use a new vocabulary of observation when comparing ideas.

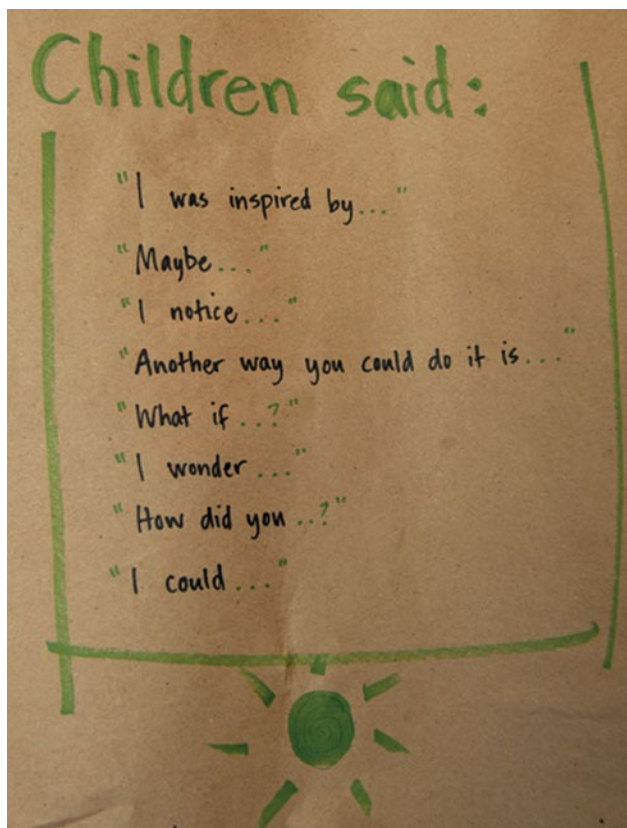
The next task of creating collages of ocean life proves challenging for some. Again, Melissa gathers the group to look at the collages, make observations and ask questions about how the artists worked. Afterwards, children who had previously considered their work finished return to their pictures to try new techniques.

Melissa displays samples of the children’s work outside of her classroom, engaging the students in deciding what to post. She uses post-its to

invite feedback from the community, in effect expanding who can learn from and contribute to the learning in the classroom.

Later, Melissa comments,

‘We have explicit conversations about where ideas come from, how they change and how we get good ideas from each other. As Elisa [one of Melissa’s students] says, “Sometimes somebody looks at what somebody else is doing,



and they like it so much that they want to do the same thing.” In this way, children still feel connected to ideas they sprout, but they release ownership of them, allowing their ideas to grow, to be transformed, reconsidered and ultimately to become part of the group understanding.’

Melissa nurtures a classroom culture in which children and teachers talk openly and productively about student work. This process of constructive critique helps children to become genuine collaborators in learning, contributing both to their own thinking and learning and to their ability to engage productively with others.

Reimagining the Who, What, Where, When, How and Why of Assessment

How do Joan’s and Melissa’s classrooms reflect the fundamental shifts in conceptualising and carrying out assessment?

The Why Shift: Assessment driven by what can be easily quantified → Assessment driven by the most important goals for student learning, whether they can be quantified or not

Rather than relying solely on the AP curriculum to dictate goals, Joan’s goals emerge from her observation of her students and her growing understanding of the ways in which they construe the world around them. While addressing the AP curriculum remains important, equally central is Joan’s desire to help students connect their learning to the broader culture in which they live. She designs her assessment practices to target this goal. Similarly, Melissa wants children to understand the social nature of learning and to develop the skills needed to participate effectively as members of a learning community. She also values observation and observational drawing as important skills for living in and understanding the world. While Melissa wants students to develop basic numeracy and literacy skills that are central to most kindergarten curricula, she also wants to focus on other goals that are just as essential for living in a democratic society.

The Who Shift: Assessment done to teachers and students → Teachers and students as protagonists in the assessment process

In Joan’s classroom, the students and Joan are both active in the assessment process, taking stock of individual learning as well as the class’ progress through written reflections and reflective discussions. Joan’s colleagues also play an important role: Joan and her colleagues belong to a learning community in which each has the opportunity to bring forward his or her work for reflection, analysis and feedback from the group. Her colleagues offer Joan a form of peer assessment, which, in concert with Joan’s own self-assessment, generate new ideas for instructional strategies to deepen students’ engagement with the course topic and one another. Insights gleaned from the conversation about Joan’s students inform future conversations about other teachers’ classes. In this way, teachers become protagonists in their own learning.





The What/When Shift: Assessment of a final product at the end of a learning experience → Assessment of process as well as product, integral to the learning experience

Assessment in Melissa's classroom becomes part of the learning experience. She assesses—and enables children to assess—their learning during the learning process itself. It is not necessary to wait until the end of the experience to know that learning is taking place.

Melissa notes that, while many people like the children's final drawings of the perch, she knows these products do not reflect all of the students' learning. In order to capture the evolution of the children's thinking and collaboration, she uses documentation¹ such as children's drafts and her notes about their verbal comments on their own and others' work to make visible the learning not typically captured on standardised tests.

Similarly, Joan uses students' written reflections as well as video of class discussions to capture students' thinking and provide the basis for collective reflection and learning. Such documentation moves assessment from a tool for stock-taking at the end of a learning experience (assessment *of* learning) to a method for tracing and shaping the knowledge-building process (assessment *of* and *for* learning). Such assessment has the potential not only to reveal progress toward a predetermined product or goal but also to shape the direction of learning.

The How/Where Shift: Assessment as a one-on-one activity (teacher assesses student; principal assesses teacher) → Assessment as a collective and relationship-building process that happens in context (in classrooms, faculty meetings, etc.)

Clearly, the shifts in the 'why, who, what and when' of assessment are interwoven with the shifts in the 'how' and 'where'. Collaborative assessment shifts the locus of authority from people outside the classroom to those actually engaged in the work—teachers and students. Assessment is not a decontextualised activity that is 'done to' children or teachers; rather, it becomes an opportunity to deepen relationships (with students, with colleagues) and to cultivate trust and respect, which in turn open up the possibility for deeper learning.

The children in Melissa's class are empowered to assess themselves and their peers, in the process becoming more receptive to different points of view. Joan not only brings the students' words to the adults, but also the adults' words to the students. In both learning communities, ideas of what a 'story of learning' can encompass are expanded for young people as well as adults.

Ultimately, these shifts in conceptualising and enacting assessment constitute a political act. The power and authority to define and evaluate learning become shared among teachers and students; the sources of evidence of learning

expand; and the assessment process becomes a more integral and powerful tool for enabling students and teachers to drive their own learning and to support one another in the learning process.

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Additional Reading

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Knowledge Trails

- 1. Assessment as an act of love**
<http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/assessment-as-an-act-of-love-ttc>
Our system is not geared up to measuring creativity, thinking, confidence and imagination. It simply is not possible to use existing assessment tools to chart children's progress in achievements which are seemingly intangible but which are more important.
- 2. Putting pupils at the heart of assessment**
<http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/assessment-pupils-at-the-heart>
Assessment has to be more than simply pointing out who can do what and who can't – it has to help pupils progress. Here, the UK's leading formative assessment expert, Shirley Clarke, looks at the top ways schools are making assessment count for every child.
- 3. Assessing creativity?**
<http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/assessing-creativity>
Assessing creativity may seem a contradiction in terms but Becky Lawrence reports that an assessment tool designed by a team at the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education appears to encourage creativity in the classroom.