

***Natural Curiosity* had the opportunity to connect with Patt Olivieri to hear more about her learning journey surrounding assessment. Patt is currently working as a Student Work Study Teacher for the Ministry of Education, and for the past 14 years has been teaching Special Education as well as Grades 6, 7 and 8. Her current position is part of an innovative professional learning program in Ontario that supports teachers as they reflect and inquire about student learning.**

What does assessment mean to you in an inquiry-based classroom?

To me, assessment is the continuous demonstration of the ‘why’ of learning (tapping into curriculum expectations, relevance, extending understanding by transferring the learning in various contexts) as well as the ‘how’, which can be demonstrated in various forms and/or formats. An inquiry stance in any learning experience is open to a cycle of learning where entry points can vary, (from curriculum expectations clustered into a ‘big idea’, or from students asking questions, simply stemming from curiosity, which may provoke deeper thinking through the inquiry process).

At the heart of any meaningful assessment is the intentionality – *what is the purpose and how does it honour a student holistically?* What has changed most for me through the evolution of assessment is asking students where and how they see themselves in the learning, as well as how they perceive my role as a co-learner. I find these questions guide students in a meaningful way as they work towards student-lead conferences throughout the year. When inquiry-based learning is embedded in the culture of class, school, etc., it is common to ask students, ‘How do you want to demonstrate your learning, in this context, and how can I help you along the way?’ It has been my experience that honouring student voice through any assessment not only helps students achieve, but enables them to critically look at themselves, others, and their environment, with new perspectives. Assessment, through inquiry, is anything but ‘standard or standardized.’

What are some strategies that you use in working with students around assessment AS learning?

Assessment AS learning is truly honouring the process of developing self-assessment skills (which impact greatly on Learning Skills and Work Habits), as well as peer-assessments. Explicitly teaching, and collectively negotiating cultural ‘norms’ as a class at the onset of the school year paves the way for other strategies to take place in a deeper, more meaningful way. I have recently embraced the ‘Knowledge Building Circle’ as a strategy to capture the nuances of learning as a social construct, and reflect on the conversation in order to determine next steps. Students navigate their learning through ‘responsible talk’ and I position myself as a navigator as well; when to hold their hand, and when to let go (always the greatest challenge).

I have also embraced learning through on-line platforms (i.e., class blog). The purpose lies in the 'reflection'; simply giving students time to think-plan-act-reflect - key elements to assessment AS learning. Accessing a safe online space allows us to continue the conversation after-school; a place to ask questions, self-assess, peer-assess, problem-solve, give descriptive feedback, respond, submit, or simply to share something because it affects them in a certain way. I find it to be a powerful enabler of student voice, as well as an audit trail of documentation. It truly shifts the practice of 'pedagogical documentation' placing the capturing tool in the hands of the students. As they share their work through pictures, stories, videos, music, poetry, etc., they are inviting and seeking feedback in a new way, not just from their teacher. These experiences build a sense of community. I still touch base with former students via our class blog – feedback is ongoing, just in a different context.



Example of Documentation - "Hair-Raising Identity"

Students posted artwork online in order to receive descriptive feedback from myself and two other students in the class. An honour system was in place whereby everyone was responsible for ensuring all students were included in the process (setting the social norms). Students were then invited to add, make changes, or even begin anew....their choice

How can assessment help guide and inform learning and teaching?

Assessment is truly a guide, not an answer for teaching and learning. The shift from 'I know the answer' to 'how can we figure out the answer together' truly speaks to learning in the 21st Century. I constantly reflect on how I 'read' students and respond to what they need, suggesting possibilities, through feedback, rather than drawing conclusions – very challenging at times since I must constantly interrogate my own biases. I believe that in order to make any significant impact, assessment must be honoured throughout the process, not simply in the product. Differentiating learning goes beyond choice....it's digging deeper into the 'why' of student voice and choice. Students must be part of the conversation as to how assessment could look and sound if any new knowledge is to be constructed for all learners. Educators embracing an open to learning stance nurtures these opportunities. We can no longer be satisfied in the comfort of knowing our students, but perhaps in the discomfort and beauty of getting to know them along the way.

Example of Documentation - "Inquiring Minds"

How have First Nations communities/individuals shaped Canadian identity?

By documenting and revisiting students' questions, you can not only collect data that will inform the direction an inquiry may take; you can also gain insight into the learner's place along a developmental growth continuum. You can also use student questions to help distinguishing between 'content knowledge' and 'critical literacy.'

