



LEADING A CULTURE OF LEARNING AT BARRIERE SECONDARY

by
Angela Stott with
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Thomas Lowe



Sane Leadership

Through my career as an educator, I've changed schools and districts, but I never imagined that I would leave my current position after such a short ride. In the waning weeks of the school year, in preparation for new adventures, my 'Pandemic Principalship' has showcased some big wins – a library renovation, and a commitment to getting our basketball courts resurfaced – but I am most proud of getting out of

the way and supporting our school's two Leadership Development Program¹ candidates so that they could take on educational leadership in our school.

Kristy Dolha and Thomas Lowe model how we became curious about better serving students and then – despite a pandemic, and perhaps because of the pandemic – how we made huge gains in shifting from a culture of ranking and sorting to a culture of learning. In getting out of the way, I worked to exemplify what Margaret Wheatley calls sane leadership, “the unshakeable faith in people's capacity to be

1 Kamloops-Thompson School District's Leadership Development Program (LDP) is a district developed two year opportunity for teachers to develop their leadership skills.

generous, creative, and kind... the commitment to create the conditions for these capacities to blossom, protected from the external environment. It is the deep knowing that, even in the most dire circumstances, more becomes possible as people engage together with compassion and discernment, self-determining their way forward.”²



Shifting Practice in Assessment

by Kristy Dolha

It's probably safe to say that the spring of 2020 was a challenging time for us all. Given this context of chaos, isolation, and uncertainty, it shouldn't be surprising that when June report cards rolled around, there was more than a little aimless wandering of the halls. Collectively, we were dazed and confused; *what were we even supposed to be reporting on, and what did it even matter?* We were coming to a troubling realization – there was an assessment elephant in the room, and it went beyond a global pandemic. We needed a plan to address the deficiencies in our assessment practices. As we connected our dilemma to the Spiral of Inquiry framework, we engaged in the 'scan, focus, and hunch'. It pointed us in a clear direction for learning.

Over the summer, our leadership team connected with Ken O'Connor, a renowned author and assessment expert from Toronto. Ken agreed to work with us, and we embarked on a learning journey that has had a powerful impact on shifting our staff's assessment practices. With Ken's guidance, we chose a collective book study and designed a series of three professional development days where we would tackle big ideas about assessment, feedback, grading, and reporting. The approach was simple: learn, address our tough questions with an expert, and take action. The format we developed was highly effective, and the process got pretty messy at times. The results, however, were robust. Every single teacher in our building is questioning their assessment practice, taking action, checking, and

reflecting. This is exciting work. From a place of safety and trust, we have established a community of care in the efforts we are making to increase our assessment literacy. This is deep learning, and has led to powerful action that has improved the quality of student learning in our classrooms.

In between our professional learning days with Ken, we collaborate, debate, and co-plan our assessment activities. We work hard to document our journey and share our learning. We make videos of our process to share at staff meetings, and we purposefully set out to pull other colleagues into our learning. The result is shifting practice for not only one or two teachers, but for our school community as a whole. We are beginning to talk openly about our epic experiments, and we are definitely building on one another's success. While there were many rabbit holes for us, one that stood out in particular was the challenge of making sense of the curricular competencies, and transforming them into meaningful learning targets. The more we talked about this dirty little secret – that the curricular competencies were not transparent or obviously addressed in our classrooms – the more we realized that not only did the students have no clue as to what these competencies are, but that the teachers were struggling with them as well. We needed an intervention.

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² Wheatley, M. Who do we choose to be? Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017.

The intervention, referencing the Spiral of Inquiry Framework, was our action. Along with two colleagues, we agreed to work on pulling apart the curricular competencies with our students. Each of us took a slightly different approach in the classroom activities, but we all ended up with a lot of input from our students about what the competencies mean. This process pulled us away from assessment of learning, and threw us into the depths of assessment *for* and *as* learning. We were engaging the kids in the process of creating dynamic formative assessment tools that would help them be more reflective in their own learning. The difference in the classroom was immediate and unmistakable; experiencing this type of success collaboratively was highly energizing... and it was infectious. Other teachers were compelled by our enthusiasm for increasing student voice and ownership for learning through effective and meaningful tasks connected to assessment. It has been an organic and authentic shift, and it was not the only shift in assessment practice that was taking place.

To speak of the results of our adventure would be premature. We are very much in the messy middle; however, at this point in our journey, there have already been some valuable takeaways. First, having authentic access to outside expertise is key. The pandemic handed us a mountain of lemons, and we made some tasty lemonade; in fact, we created a whole new flavour that was previously unavailable. We discovered a format that worked, and we will work hard to continue with this format. Second, collaboration and strong relationships amongst staff are absolutely paramount. We needed to be vulnerable, we needed to let others join us in the trenches of our own classrooms, and we needed to build each other up. Finally, it is important to remember that there is no end to this messy and meaningful work. This IS the Spiral of Inquiry. Therefore, as we move to checking, we are also simultaneously scanning – asking “what is going on for our learners?” – so that we may dive deeper into our work to put students at the centre of every pedagogical decision we make.

So: how do we know if we are making enough of a difference in this work? To evidence that, I will share a synopsis of a conversation I had with a student recently:



Anthony: “Ever since you teachers changed your grading, I’m really having to think harder at school. It used to be that I could try only at the beginning, and then coast for the rest of the course. Now I can’t get away with that anymore.”

Me: “Anthony! You make me feel like we’re winning here!”

Anthony: (only marginally confused) “Hmm. I never thought of it that way.”



Going Gradeless

by Thomas Lowe

A shift to remote learning in March 2020 that saw education transition from a bricks and mortar model to exclusively online learning was a major disruption in students’ educations. My students began to focus on the ‘game’ of online learning, and attempting to ‘complete’ courses faster by speed-running their requirements as opposed to actually focusing on learning and skill development. Students had lost the focus of what I know, love, and preach: learning matters, grades do not.

I was teaching a small Chemistry 12 class filled with some very keen students. It would be an understatement to say that they became stressed by the news that we were transitioning to an online environment. I listened to their worries, approached the situation with curiosity, and inwardly stressed about how I would best serve the needs of my students. It was obvious that the main stressor for my

students was that their grades would slip in an online environment. I sensed a learning moment.

I have been talking a big game for years about how grades don't improve learning. These students had all been subject to many of my rants about learning over grades, and yet their biggest worry was whether or not the pandemic will affect their grade as opposed to their *learning*. So, I put my money where my mouth was and completely threw out all formal summative assessments. I invited my Principal, Angela, to our first online learning session as a class and we laid everything out for our students. When told that we would follow the Minister of Education's commitment to sustaining the grade each student had prior to a move to remote learning – in this case all As – there was actually some initial pushback. We had two types of reactions: suspicion that this was some sort of trick – “what's the catch?” – and worries about their motivation, as these were students that thrived on extrinsic rewards and accolades. We continued to listen to the students' concerns, and then presented them with research that “the misuse of extrinsic rewards impedes creativity, stifles personal satisfaction and turns play into work.”³ There was still some trepidation from the students; however, after reminding them that they would need the skills learned in the class to be successful at the post-secondary level, there was complete buy-in and we never looked back.

Initially, I was worried that students would lose interest as the course became more academically rigorous, because there was really nothing for them to lose by not pushing themselves. I envisioned that students would stop showing up to scheduled Zoom meetings, work would not be completed, and a general mood of complacency would bog down the class. In reality, the opposite happened. Students were asking for more. I started a study hangout Zoom time – this became their ‘pandemic social’. We created a WhatsApp group where students would answer other students' questions before I could get to them. We were growing community.

Because students no longer had to do any of the *work*, I was forced to reframe *work* into *practice*. This pushed me to cast a critical eye on all of *my*

practices. *Is this the most efficient and best use of my students' time?* became a theme in my thinking and professional development. My students gained study skills and efficient learning practices. Many students shared that learning became easier in their other classes as well, and many admitted to spending way more time than they usually would by adding details and supplementary information where they normally would have done the minimum to *get the grade*. Maddison, a student in the class, said it best in a 2020 conversation: “Before, I would just do assignments to finish them. I would copy off a friend and just hand it in for the mark. Now I can't believe I did that; it was stupid. I didn't learn anything. Now everything that I do, I check myself to see if I am learning.” Finally, my students told me that they felt less stressed about assignments because they were less focused on *getting it right* or *pleasing the teacher*; they were focused on the purpose of the practice – to learn. I saw increases in creativity, metacognition, and even risk taking.

At the end of June, seemingly in contradiction to everything I had done from March to year end, I asked the students to write the final exam for me. I needed evidence that eliminating traditional assessments and all grading, and relying solely on feedback, transferred to what was considered a ‘high stakes’ final. They came prepared to show their best

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³ Pink, D.H. Drive. New York: Penguin Group, 2009.

learning as contributors to my Inquiry. The students outshone previous cohorts. This, coupled with anecdotal evidence and a researched base, tells me that taking grades out of the learning equations has so much potential. We know that extrinsic rewards and punishment really only work for the short term, and destroy many of the things that we are looking to nurture in our students. When Taylor, a 2020 graduate, said, "Grades... aren't what matters. At the end of the day, it's learning that matters," I knew that my decision to pivot in March was right, and that I had my work cut out for me in the coming year, because this was only the beginning.



Embracing Uncertainty

In creating the conditions for leadership to thrive, Kristy and Thomas are only two examples of what is possible when educators step into the arena to challenge the mindset of 'tradition' or 'what has always been done', and embrace the uncertainty of the unknown.

When I arrived in February of 2020 to Barriere Secondary, I did not plan for my stay to be so short. I am grateful that, collectively, we did not let a virus get in the way of keeping learning at the forefront of our agenda. I am proud of the work we have done.

In sum, I think this exemplifies what Margaret Wheatley argues the world needs: "we need leaders who put service over self, who can be steadfast through crises and failures, who want to stay present and make a difference to the people, situations, and causes they care about... Let us use whatever power and influence we have, working with whatever resources are already available, mobilizing the people who are with us to work for what they care about." ⁴

⁴ Wheatley, M. Who do we choose to be? Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017.

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