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GROWING A CULTURE OF ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING IN THE SECONDARY CONTEXT

LISA EDWARDS

Lisa Edwards explores how we can shift school-wide assessment practice and create a culture focussed on learning for both teachers and students…

As teachers, we know that assessment of, for and as learning is happening every day, in every classroom. We know that it occurs through the questions we ask; the answers we elicit, in both writing and through discussion; in the conversations we facilitate between students; in the self- and peer-assessment opportunities we provide; in more formal tasks; and in the ways that we record the evidence of learning following these formal and informal assessments. We know that in best practice, the feedback we provide to students through this varied assessment is designed to advance the learning of our students, and that the feedback we gain through our assessment drives improvements to our teaching, as we tailor learning experiences based on what the evidence tells us that our students need.

Yet, despite our best intentions, in many secondary contexts a continuing focus (conscious or otherwise) on formal, summative assessment can overshadow the value of both this continuous formative assessment, and of feedback, particularly in the eyes of our students. In many high schools, if we asked our students to tell us about assessment connected to their learning, it's likely the majority would talk about formal tasks and tests, exams and assignments. They'd talk about HSC exams, NAPLAN, check-in, assessment tasks and schedules, weightings, marks and grades.

The research has indicated for a long time that providing marks and grades has the potential to detract from student engagement with more detailed constructive feedback and can have a detrimental impact on learner motivation and self-efficacy. It de-motivates low performing students and can foster complacency in high achievers (Black and Wiliam, 1998a). When a grade is present, students are less likely to heed written or verbal feedback. "A marked improvement? A review of the evidence on written marking" from Oxford University (Elliot et. al, 2016) is an excellent recent review of the literature on this topic.

The big question school leaders face is how can we shift school-wide assessment practice, and perceptions of assessment, and create a culture focused on learning across the school – for teachers and students?

THE IMPORTANCE OF A GROWTH MINDSET

Before digging deeper into assessment, let's consider the mindset that our students need to become adaptive learners who engage with our feedback to improve. Carol Dweck's (2006) mindset research remains highly relevant in our schools, almost 20 years later. Dweck found that 40% of students believe their ability is fixed; they believe that either they can do it or not and will give up when encountering difficulty. Another 40% understand that learning requires time and effort; these students try harder in the face of difficulty – our growth mindset students. The remainder sits in the middle. So, for about 60% of our students, we have work to do on mindset.

There is certainly hope - Dweck's work showed that the growth mindset can be cultivated. Yet in many cases the fixed mindset prevails. How many times have we heard, "I just can't do Maths," or "My essays are never going to be better than a C," or "Why would I bother trying when I know I am going to fail? Or just get another D?"

The good news is that as an educational community, we continue to strive towards growth – our collegial dialogue continues to explore the problem of these fixed mindsets. How can we encourage all students to see the value in effort and practice? How do we ensure that students use our feedback to improve? How can we develop students who take responsibility for their learning, as well as building self-efficacy and resilience?

Yet even as we attempt to solve these problems, in many schools we retain assessment practices that hinder a growth mindset. Yes, we have system requirements to be adhered to for assessment in Stage 6, but we have much more flexibility to develop growth-oriented practices to lay the foundations and create self-motivated learners in

Stages 4 and 5. Some practices we continue to see that undermine our best efforts towards a growth culture include:

- Summative assessment driven HSC-style assessment schedules and tasks from Stage 6 right down to Stage 4
- Teaching and learning programs that emphasise content without planning the evidence of learning to be collected.
- A lack of clarity about the purpose of learning and what success looks like for students.
- Feedback that is not explicit and task-oriented, which students ignore or don't engage with, particularly when there's a mark or a grade on the page.
- Missed opportunities to teach meaningful self- and peer-assessment.
- A lack of time and metacognitive support for students to understand themselves as learners and set meaningful and individualised learning goals.
- School reports that still emphasise grades (and in many cases marks and ranks – imagine coming last in the class or year in Year 7 or 8 – what would be the impact on motivation for that student moving forward?)

THE "IMAGE" OF THE STUDENT

Professor Jim Tognolini, Director of the University of Sydney's Centre for Educational Measurement and Assessment (CEMA), defines assessment as follows:

"Assessment involves professional judgement based upon an image formed by the collection of information about student performance." (Tognolini & Stanley, 2007).
"… that professional judgement is owned on a day-to-day basis by teachers… Central to the way that teachers assess is the idea of building up an image of what it is students know and can do. It is this image in a standards-referencing system that is used by teachers to build evidence to "track" and report student progress along a developmental continuum." (Tognolini, 2020)

Not only does Tognolini's definition emphasise that we are assessing formally and informally in every lesson, but it also empowers teachers by underscoring the importance of teacher professional judgement.
I highly recommend listening to The CPL's podcast with Professor Tognolini "The Teacher's Voice in Education-al Assessment" which emphasises the importance of teachers having confidence in their own professional judgement about assessing their students' development (in relation to grade and performance descriptors provided by our system). The important role of the school community and its leaders in this is to collaborate with, and support, teachers to exercise their professional judgment.
This approach to assessment is also an important reminder that when reporting on student achievement, we need to recognise that a student might have demonstrated achievement of an outcome in class discussion, or in a class-based task or activity. Summative assessment should not be the sole source of information about student achievement – and particularly not in Stages 4 and 5. It is just one of many sources of information teachers should be using to create the "image" of the student, which is then reported to parents (and students).
Vitally, to shift away from a culture that values only marks and grades, this view of assessment supports students to understand that every piece of learning matters; every activity and task matters and is an opportunity to improve, and they are not just being assessed on three or four key summative tasks over the course of a year.

WHAT DOES ASSESSMENT LOOK LIKE IN A GROWTH CULTURE?

Black and Wiliam's (2009) research into formative assessment and feedback remains a staple of best practice. Their work emphasises clear learning intentions and success criteria, classroom activities designed to elicit evidence of learning, quality feedback, peer learning and assessment, and self-assessment. Wiliam's Embedded Formative Assessment (2018) is rich in practical application and Lyn Sharratt's Clarity is another useful and accessible text for teachers and school leaders regarding assessment planning across the school, where assessment informs instruction. There are, of course, many other excellent resources on assessment practice, and in the next section, I provide some ideas and strategies drawn from a range of research to develop a growth culture in my classroom, faculty, and across the school.

1. Learning intentions: A roadmap for learning

Clear learning intentions should be connected to

syllabus outcomes and describe (in student-friendly language) what students should know, understand, and be able to do.

This doesn't mean every lesson needs a learning intention (though many schools have gone in this direction, and that can be helpful). Structured unit outlines can set up learning powerfully, with higher order driving questions and a clear expectation that assessment is continuous and all learning matters, thus providing a roadmap for students' learning. This is a unit outline I created for English. The structure can be adapted for different courses – what's important is that we share with students where we are going with the unit, and what they are going to be learning.

ENGLISH STAGE 5, YEAR 9, UNIT 1

Unit Outline for Students. Breaking Boundaries of gender in texts. Duration: 10 weeks

Texts	You will study a set film and a range of other texts to explore how gender is represented in our society.
Class work	You will engage in class discussion, analytical and evaluative writing about the texts studied, and create imaginative and persuasive pieces of writing that represent ideas about gender.
Key English Concepts	**Representation:** Representation is the depiction of a thing, person or idea in written, visual, performed or spoken language. There are many different ways of seeing the world as our view is framed by context and culture. This means that each representation offers a different construction of the world and of experience in it. **Code and Convention:** The basic elements of speech, writing and visual language convey menaing when they combine in commonly understood arrangements or patterns. **Context:** Context refers to factors acting upon composers and responders that impinge on meaning. To understand context we need to look beyond the text and consider the world in which it was produced and the worlds of its reception. **Perspective:** Perspective is a lens through which we learn to see the world; it shapes what we see and the way we see it. Perspective includes the values that the responder and composer bring to a text.
Key questions or focus of the unit	**Driving Question**: How do texts reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes? **Essential Questions:** • What stereotypes about masculinity and femininity exist in our society? • How do texts reflect contextual values about gender and convey ideas about masculinity and femininity? • How and why are representations of gender changing in our society? • How can we represent our own ideas about gender in our own imaginative and persuasive writing? **Overarching idea:** representations of gender reflect society's values abour gender, yet texts have the power to challenge and reinforce gender stereotypes.
Syllabus outcomes	EN5-4B effectively transfers knowledge, skills and understanding of language concepts into new and different contexts. EN5-5C thinks imaginatively, creatively, interpretively and critically about information and increasingly complex ideas and arguments to respond to and compose texts in a range of contexts. EN5-7D understand and evaluates the diverse ways texts can represent personal and public worlds. EN-8D questions, challenges and evaluates cultural assumptions in texts and their effects on meaning.
Assessment	**Assessment as you are learning:** class discussion, regular writing tasks in class and for homework, book work - anlytical and evaluative writing in response to texts, imaginative and persuasive written pieces exploring your own ideas about gender. **Assessment of what you have learned:** PETAL paragraphs and discursive writing.

It is vital for students to understand what they are learning, and why. Clarity in all stages of learning and assessment is one of the keys to growth.

2. Success criteria

Quality success criteria describe what success looks like in relation to the learning intentions. Some of the best success criteria are those that are co-developed by students and teachers, and remember, success criteria are not just for formal tasks.

Checklists for success, detailed rubrics, models and scaffolds, annotated models, annotated student work samples demonstrating high/mid/low levels, and co-developed criteria are all examples of success criteria – showing students clearly what is expected. Explaining the difference between a high and middle sample in explicit terms can be very powerful in increasing student understanding.

One of my favourite strategies for modelling success is to use descriptive rubrics.

I like to use progression terms that DON'T align to the common five grade structure, as a small step away from student focus on grades, and language that fosters growth. Once familiar with them, students can be supported to use rubrics for self- and peer-assessment.

	Developing	Consolidating	Accomplishing	Extending
Sensory imagery	Your writing largely relies on recount; limited appeal to the senses. Focus on being much more descriptive.	A few attempts to create images; could be more vivid/ appeal to the senses more.	Some strong use of imagery; evocative or engaging descriptions in parts, although sometimes cliched/ inconsistent.	You create imagery that is vivid, detailed and captures the moment/ setting/ character evocatively.
Figurative language	Your writing is literal. You need to develop your understanding of figurative devices such as simile and metaphor and integrate them in your writing.	Your language tends to tell, rather than show. Work to integrate some personification, simile or metaphor to increase complexity.	You have worked hard to integrate figurative language devices. It's not always original but you use it to convey your ideas.	You have created rich, figurative language - a range of expressions that are original and give insight into your keys ideas.
Spelling and punctuation	You need to check many spelling errors. Revise your punctuation - capital letters, apostrophes, placement of commas - and proofread.	Written expression is mostly sound. However, there are too many spelling and punctuation errors. Proofread.	Some lapses in spelling and punctuation. However, your writing is mostly fluid and coherent.	Your writing is fluent and grammatically correct. few errors. You use some complex punctuation correctly.
Setence structure/ paragraphs	Paragraphing needs attention. You must revise the structure of your piece and sentence types, ensuring you create correct sentences and logical paragraphs.	Some breaks in sentence flow and grammatical errors throughout. Ensure that you read your work out loud and insert full stops/ paragraphs where necessary.	Sentence structure is mostly consistent; some good attempts to vary sentence length and integrate correct compound sentences.	Excellent control of varied sentence structures. Your piece has 'rhythm' and reads beautifully. Paragraphing is considered and creates coherence.
Setting/ character devlopment	Character/ setting has little to no development. Too much 'telling' - you need to ***show*** character through actions, behaviours, personality etc. ***Show*** setting through the five senses.	Some solid attempts to describe character/ setting. Character and setting would benefit from being more original - avoid cliches with these elements.	Character/ setting is captured quite nicely. In parts, there are some lapses in expression and/ or lack of original descriptions of these elements. Consider more vivid setting and create empathy for your character.	Character/ setting is believable and authentic. Your descriptions work well together and make the reader care about your character.

I have also found that rubrics enable parents to understand expectations and support their children at home. Moving away from grades to rubrics like the one below can be a powerful enabler for students to understand their current level, and where they need to head next. This is an example that I have used in English, but again, rubrics can be developed across KLAs, and for different types of tasks.

3. Explicit descriptive feedback

"Feedback is only successful if students use it to improve their performance." (Wiliam, 2016)

Therefore, central to our provision of feedback is teaching students how to engage with it, and providing the time for them to do so. Whether written or verbal, you have taken time to provide feedback to students. In order for students to recognise its value, it is vital we incorporate feedback into class time.

Quality feedback involves reciprocal dialogue. Where am I going? How am I going? Where to next and how to get there? Provide feedback on what the student did well, what they need to focus on, and next steps.

Teacher feedback should be specific and descriptive. Avoid ego-based praise – focus on the task. When you wrote THIS, it was effective because… To keep improving, do THIS.

Frame lessons around one or two deep questions. Think-pair-share and provide task-oriented verbal feedback on student responses. Don't just say, "Good answer," but tell them why it is was good and prompt further thinking. "Did you consider…?"

"*Avoid grading. Grades are consistently found to demotivate low attainers. They also fail to challenge high attainers, often making them complacent. So avoid giving a grade or mark except where absolutely necessary. It is rarely necessary, and almost never desirable, to grade every piece of work.*" (Black and Wiliam, 1998b)

Importantly, the feedback that assessment provides to teachers about student learning must now be used to plan future learning. "Assessment becomes formative assessment when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet the needs." (Black and Wiliam, 1998a)

4. Peer- and self-assessment

"The amount of feedback we can give our students is limited. In the longer term, the most productive strategy is to develop our students' ability to give themselves feedback." (Wiliam, 2016)

Peer- and self-assessment fall into NESA's "Assessment as

learning" category. As with feedback, teaching students to peer- and self-assess requires time – but it is time well spent in the long term. Wiliam's "The Secret of Effective Feedback" (2016) is a useful article to use with teachers, and contains a range of practical tips that are applicable across the curriculum.

Wiliam recommends starting students in assessing anonymous student work: what feedback would you give the creator, based on the criteria we've developed together? Then, move onto the work of peers, and finally, self-assessment. Not only is this strategy useful to develop the metacognition and self-assessment skills of individual students but having a team of critical friends providing constructive feedback to each other is a powerful tool for teachers to build collective efficacy. As trust and skill develop, this strategy can strengthen the achievement of the whole group.

Some specific and creative self- and peer-assessment strategies, courtesy of Dylan Wiliam include:

- Self-marking – students mark their own piece using the criteria and teacher comments prior to receiving back the task and grade – indicate performance against criteria/rubric and add comments.
- Task/criteria matching – for extended responses - small groups (3-4 students) are given responses with completed criteria but they are mixed up. They must match the criteria to the response.
- Tell students how many of their answers on a task are incorrect and ask them to figure out the incorrect responses – this is a great one for Maths, Science, or any multiple choice tests.
- Teacher provides verbal recorded feedback instead of written – students to annotate their work as they listen.
- Give comments only and students are required to reflect on what they did well, what they need to improve, and their next step learning goals BEFORE a mark or grade is given.

Other simple peer- and self-feedback ideas:

- Two stars and a wish – identify two positives and an area for improvement.
- Plus, minus, interesting – a positive, something to work on, and something that makes you think.
- Colour coding – highlight elements of own or peer's writing in different colours eg key concepts in yellow, supporting evidence in green, evaluation in pink
- Traffic lights – use green, amber and red cards for students to provide feedback to teachers about their understanding.
- Checklists – what do students need to include to meet the criteria? Have you included all of these elements? Checklists can be co-created with students.
- What would I change to improve my work? – after reflecting on feedback.

5. Goal-setting and planning learning

The next step in quality assessment as learning practice is to guide students to reflect on their learning and achievement and to set goals for future learning. Again, growth-oriented schools will prioritise processes and TIME for student self-reflection, before rushing into the next content. Essentially, by providing this time and guidance, we are valuing growth skills over content. This means we are teaching students to be better learners, not just delivering content. In many cases, this involves a shift in mindset for teachers.

Some guided reflection questions:

- How did your self-assessment compare to your teacher's feedback? Did you identify similar or different strengths and areas for focus?
- What did you do well and why do you think you did well with this?
- What did you not do as well and why?
- What questions do you have?
- What specifically do you need to improve in the next learning phase? Identify three key focuses for improvement.
- Identify three specific learning goals from this reflection.

Similarly, teachers must use their assessment to plan the next phase of learning. What skills have most students achieved? What areas need further development? What differentiation needs to occur to cater to the differences in student need, as evidenced by the data you have collected and the "images" of your students?

HOW, THEN, DO WE REPORT ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT, IF NOT BASED SOLELY ON SUMMATIVE TASKS?

Using this range of formative assessment and feedback strategies with students does not preclude us from reporting outcomes on the required five-point scale. It does mean that instead of basing our reporting on a

small number of summative tasks, we are using a broad range of evidence collected over a semester or year, which has created the "image" of our student, to make a professional judgement of our students' achievements against each of the outcomes. The professional dialogue created during the standard setting of alignment to the common grade scale or course performance descriptors between teachers of a cohort is in itself powerful learning for us.

Finally, we need to be creative (and brave) in our reporting. An overall A-E grade is not required. We can use the five descriptive word equivalents of A-E grades to report on each outcome, based on the range of evidence we have collected: outstanding, high, sound, basic and limited. We certainly don't need marks and ranks. If parents request information about their child's achievement in relation to the cohort, we can provide them with the number of students in each grade category. We need to educate students and parents about the rationale behind our reporting.

Of course, shifting culture is a challenging process, which will not happen overnight. Students need to see their teachers prioritising this practice right across the school, which requires commitment and consistency. I have found that professional learning communities engaged in a form of reflective action learning can be a successful way to learn together, put theory into practice, reflect on our impact and thus refine our practice together. Hargreaves and O'Connor's (2018) *Collaborative Professionalism* is a fantastic resource to explore strategies for collaborative professional learning in teams or schoolwide. But, starting small is also ok. A faculty, or team, can find success, which can gain momentum and be shared across the school.

Improving assessment for learning starts with a seed of intent – to refine our practice with student learning at the centre. With emphasis on evidence-informed formative assessment practice, that seed of intent can grow into a rich school - wide culture of quality assessment for learning. A culture in which teacher and student focus is not driven by formal, summative assessment, nor by marks and grades (as is so often the case in the secondary context), but by a positive mindset of growth and improvement, where every activity is valued as an opportunity to learn.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Edwards is a school leader passionate about the potential of public education to change lives.
With over 20 years of experience with the NSW Department of Education, working in schools in Sydney's south and southwest, Lisa is an English teacher by training, and at heart. Her leadership journey has included the roles of Head Teacher Wellbeing, Head Teacher English, and Deputy Principal. She has developed resources and presented on assessment, pedagogy and programming, working in collaboration with the Department's secondary curriculum team, and has published and presented for the NSW English Teachers' Association. Lisa received an Australian Council for Educational Leaders award and a Premier's Award for Public Service for her work leading improvement in literacy and HSC achievement, and currently presents for the NSW Teachers' Federa-tion's Centre for Professional Learning on leading lifting achievement and quality assessment practice.
Lisa is a strong advocate for public education and educational equity, dedicated to supporting teachers in public schools to maximise learning outcomes and, therefore, opportunities for our students.