

Assessment for Learning Strategies in a Sheltered Learning Block

The principal at Lake Cowichan Secondary works with his vice-principal and the school's ESL specialist to reverse the school's achievement trajectory.

by Peter Jory

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Jeff Rowan and I faced a significant challenge in reversing the school's achievement trajectory when first assigned to be the new leadership team of Lake Cowichan Secondary for the 2008/09 school year. Careful examination of our school's data led us to believe there was no single issue responsible for the school's low results, so we felt it was going to take a multi-faceted approach to make the changes that were necessary. Our conversations with staff revealed frustration with the size of some of our academic classes and the inordinately wide range of ability in each room. Also, in a small school like ours, each cohort can have a very distinct personality, and that year's grade tens clearly were not going to raise our results out of any

inherent love of learning. We needed to make a structural change to better meet the varied needs of our learners and give them a better chance to be successful. The first idea that took hold was the creation of a sheltered learning block.

Although the first semester was already underway, we started with changes to the timetable that split our English 10 classes a third way, moving some of our most struggling and reluctant learners into a new block. We were able to make the moves we needed, with some difficulty, but we still needed someone to teach the class. Our ESL specialist, Karen Kloske, had a block of Learning Assistance time that was undersubscribed. Her thoughtful feedback regarding learning in the

school, her experience supporting ESL students through various levels of English classes, and her reputation as a skilled and determined instructor made her the leading candidate. Through a series of conversations I managed to convince her to take on this challenge.

Three weeks into the first semester we had a special Learning Services Team meeting to populate the class with students that were deemed to be “at risk” in school, with priority going to those already floundering in their semester one English 10 classes. The purpose of the smaller class was to give the students the best chance to pass the course legitimately *and* also to demonstrate the necessary skillset to pass the exam. Letters were sent to parents, and

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we met with each identified student to explain the timetable change and what the class would look like. All accepted the proposal readily. Though just a dozen students deep, and selected on academic need rather than behaviour, the class was still daunting in its make-up. Other teachers, many of whom had experienced these students in their own classes with mixed success, offered their opinion. “Good luck with that,” they said. Karen and I looked at the group and I asked her, “Can you get seven passes?” I figured I had the right person for the job when she responded, “How about all of them?”

The next decision Karen made was especially brave. She decided, on her own, to drop all traditional assessment practice and move completely to an *Assessment for Learning* (AFL) model. We had only just dipped our toes into this water in our school and in our district, and even if our theoretical background as a group was beginning to grow, neither of us had any practical experience at all using it in a classroom. So now Karen was teaching a course that had already started, populated with challenging kids, with no enrolling experience with English 10 or AFL. Daunting, for sure!

In October, with her class now underway, our next staff PLC session focused on learning intentions. Ses-

sions followed with criteria, feedback, and the Schimmer BCELC webcast (<http://bcelc.insinc.com/webcastseries/20081001/>), and these continued to add to Karen’s knowledge and comfort with her practice. She and I also had weekly, even daily, chats about her class, as well as several informal conversations with other interested educators in our Formative Assessment Roundtable. The initial goal for her class was retraining them to avoid the “good enough” mentality where marginal work merely reinforced their current level of learning. Requiring assignments to be “Fully Meeting” or “Exceeding” expectations before they would be accepted forced them to continue the revising process and to keep pushing their learning forward. There was then no stigma from poor assignment grades, as everyone was

expected to share and revise a draft many times over until an appropriate level of learning was shown. This concept, with repeated explaining, was eventually accepted by students. Without assignment marks to distract students from the focus of learning, and no “out” provided for missing assignments by averaging, the focus gradually switched over to completing better quality work. The philosophy of constant revision meant fewer overall projects, and the students’ notebooks were, by typical standards, very thin. “We’ve been working on the same assignment all term.” At least, that’s how it seemed to some of the students, but if the quantity of work was far less, the quality of their work was certainly far better.

None of this progress came easily. Every day presented new challenges, and the make-up of the class, the changes to her practice, and the constant search for engaging course material, stretched Karen to the edge of her own comfort zone. Class management was a struggle at times, but like the rubrics for many of the assignments, standards for behaviour were co-constructed with the group, and I came across many “conferences” in the hall reinforcing class expectations with the individ-

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Editor

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uals who needed extra reminding. However, one thing was clear, even on the worst days: students were learning.

As the first reporting session drew near, the process of developing a percentage for each student without spreadsheets or marks programs to fall back on added a new source of concern for Karen. There had been frequent reviews of student work and conversations regarding progress relative to criteria and course outcomes, but there still needed to be some sort of leap to generate a percentage to share with the students and then put on their report cards. Karen and I met several times to discuss where she thought they were in their learning, and it was my job, I felt, to empower her to use her professional judgement, which she eventually did. Several students received an "I" initially, as key assignments were still in the "Not Yet

Meeting" category, but then most responded with a work surge, and when their classroom assessment was revised accordingly they seemed pleased with their percentages in the "C+" range. This cycle repeated itself in the second term of the semester, as you might expect.

Aside from my guest appearances to help with specific curricular items, Karen continued to make the focus on skills and strategies that produced confidence. Still, the lead-up to the final exam was stressful as neither of us had any idea what would happen when they got in the room. "Is this actually working?" we often wondered. Students' ability to deconstruct text had certainly advanced and their final drafts were far better than anything they had done before; however, the question remained: when they finally sat down in the exam, would their skills transfer in a manner that indicated

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English 10 Exam Pass Rate		
	All BC	LCSS
2007/08	92	81
2008/09	92	91
2009/10	91	94

English 10 Cohort Exam Pass Rate		
	All BC	LCSS
2007/08	81	70
2008/09	82	78
2009/10	79	88

learning?

What did happen at the end of the course was more than a little encouraging. She did have two students who, despite frequent attempts to re-engage them in their learning, did not complete enough of the outcomes and would need to repeat. Another student dropped out for medical reasons and has since returned and re-engaged and has had enough success to be moved forward into grade 12. Of the students who took the exam, only one did not complete it. This was

disappointing but not completely surprising. He told us later that he “blanked” and that he was mad at himself and would have liked to have done better. He still passed the course. Another student wrote a test that marginally met expectations and earned a passing score. His essays weren’t polished for a grade ten student, but he filled the booklet with ideas that were thoughtful and reasonably on target. He then took a break, went back in to the gym, and used the planning strategies he was taught in his English class to pass

the Social Studies 11 exam he wrote that afternoon. For a student who had, until this course, not written a full page of text in a single class in his school career, this constituted a major breakthrough. If our intention as educators is to turn reluctant learners into confident learners, then this young man should be our poster boy.

The rest of class acquitted themselves well, writing exams that came close to or exceeded their class assessments, which were in the sixties. This meant nine students passing the course, most of whom were looking quite unlikely to do so at the end of September. In a small school like ours, this is a huge statistical boost in terms of pass and transition rates. More importantly, overcoming this significant hurdle was a huge boost to each individual’s confidence and sense of accomplishment as they moved towards graduation. They were able to complete a challenging course in which they were struggling, and seven of them even produced results that exceeded the

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school's exam average from the previous three years. This was indeed a breakthrough.

The other positive effect of this experiment was increased credibility for the *Assessment for Learning* strategies and practices. Teachers who had been skeptical were now at least curious, and those that had been curious were now genuinely interested. Several other teachers, buoyed by Karen's results and the shift in culture, decided to give it a try. Though the practices have not become pervasive in our school, most teachers not only use some or even most of the Six Keys (now posted in every class and staff washroom!), they do so in a much more intentional manner.

Karen has gone on to work in the ESL program at Frances Kelsey in Mill Bay, and though she is not currently teaching an enrolling class that would allow her to continue with her AFL practices, her added experience with the English 10 exam has helped her to better support her new students as well as lobby for changes to the way ESL students are assessed in our province. For the record, she is still not completely over the students that "got away" in that class.

The next year we repeated the strategy of the sheltered English 10 block with a wonderful new teacher who used AFL strategies right from the start of the course with an arguably more willing group, and had even more success. The entire cohort fared well in their classes and in their exam sessions, venturing into some rarified air for us.

The data piece I've been looking at more lately is the *Cohort Exam Pass Rate* (see box previous page), which I get by dividing the number of exam passes by the total September cohort. As it is our responsibility to teach *all* of our students, looking at how many in each cohort pass an exam is more meaningful to me than only considering the students who don't drop or are those that are allowed to write at the end of each term. It isn't flawless information, as students who drop can retake courses or rewrite exams with a later group which can lead to a rebound after a low year, but I still like it because it is much more inclusive.

Jeff and I have been pleased that our overall achievement continues to move in the right direction at LCSS, and we believe that the sheltered learning blocks and our *Assessment for Learning* work are important factors in our school's development. The vocabulary and conversations about learning have improved in our staff room and classrooms, and I am certain that Karen's success with that first group was paramount to kick-starting this change. Still, there remains some discomfort regarding a practice that can do so much to improve learning. The province's new Personalized Learning agenda may open the door for *Assessment for Learning* in courses with the most dense and prescriptive curricula, and perhaps one day AFL will become the norm in all secondary classrooms. In the meantime, it will take teachers like Karen who are brave and determined enough to let go of classroom practices that are comfortable, to make way for practices that are exemplary. 

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