

Rethinking Professional Learning and Assessment

Assessment is—traditionally—how schools measure what students know and can do. But perhaps, instead, it is more a process of *how* students learn rather than *what* they have learned. But this deeper understanding of the learning process requires a more comprehensive form of professional learning.

One way of better assessing the learning process is by trading summative tests for teacher-created assessments that have students applying skills and knowledge to meaningful tasks. These assessments are more directly connected to the curriculum, therefore requiring students to use higher order thinking skills.

New Hampshire's Performance Assessment for Competency Education (PACE) initiative is an evaluation that assesses deeper student understanding. Teachers score sample student work using rubrics, then meet together to calibrate their assessment of the work, sharing their rationales and evidence for the scores they gave. Depending on the intended use of the assessment results, additional checks and training are built in, including comparison to the Smarter Balanced test.

Research shows that educators can learn from seeing each other at work, comparing practices, sharing tools such as assessments, rubrics, and scoring protocols, and gaining reassurance from one another. Teachers who collaborate on the creation and scoring of performance assessments become better at curriculum design and instruction. And when professional learning is centered on the work that students produce during these assessments, teachers become more adept in diagnosing, understanding, and addressing student learning.

In this way, assessment feeds a constant cycle of reflection and refinement that allows teachers to take more ownership of the learning in their classrooms. This shift requires teachers to go beyond interim checkpoints to map out how increasingly complex understandings develop continuously over time. One way to accomplish this is through learning progressions. Mapping out these developmental progressions requires teachers to dig deep into student work, deconstructing exactly how students make sense of the material.

When teachers work together collectively then use the learning progressions in their classrooms—testing assumptions and revising as needed—they develop a deeper expertise in recognizing and supporting the development of effective reasoning and problem solving. These inquiry processes become even more powerful when students themselves are mature enough to perform self-assessments to deepen their own expertise in learning.

Of course schools need to ensure that teachers have the time, support, and professional autonomy to calibrate performance assessments or create new learning progressions. But considering the investment made in testing and accountability, it's an investment worth making.