

Involving Students in Communicating about their Learning

by Anne Davies

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Classroom Connections International

2449D Rosewall Crescent
Courtenay, British Columbia
Canada
V9N 8R9

Tel: 1.800.603.9888
Fax: 1.250.703.2921
email: editor@connect2learning.com

“What people really need is a good listening to.”

Mary Lou Casey

In schools across North America students are increasingly involved in communicating to others about their learning. Educators are learning important lessons about how to involve students and others in ways that support student learning. Students, teachers, principals, parents, and others say that the investment of time is well worth the benefits they derive. In an upcoming book, Gregory, Cameron, and Davies (in press) explain that involving students in communicating their learning in these ways supports learning for the following reasons:

- When students communicate with others about their learning, they learn about what they have learned, what they need to learn, and what kind of support may be available to them. Research shows that when students are involved in the assessment process and learn to articulate what they have learned and what they still need to work on, achievement improves (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Sternberg, 1996).
- When students show evidence of learning to an audience they receive feedback and recognition from themselves and from others. This descriptive (non-judgmental) feedback helps guide and support their learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Sutton, 1997; Wiggins, 1993).
- The process of selecting what evidence of learning to show, who to show it to, and what kind of feedback to request, gives students an opportunity to construct their understanding and to help others make meaning of their learning. When students are offered choices, they are personally motivated (Jensen, 1998; Kohn, 1999; Stiggins, 2000).
- Research indicates that when parents are involved in talking about learning with their children, they achieve more. The more parents are involved, the higher the student achievement levels (Henderson and Berla, 1995). Longitudinal studies identifying factors that lead to resilience in students from at-risk environments report that when students have conversations with parent substitutes such as grandparents and older siblings and have an external support system that rewards competence and provides them with a sense of coherence, they are more likely to be resilient (Werner and Smith, 1992).

“When students communicate their learning using a variety of work samples, they go beyond what grades, numbers and scores alone can show; they are able to examine the depth, the detail, and the range of their own learning to figure out their strengths and what they need to work on next” (Gregory, Cameron, Davies, in press). This is all part of learning to self-monitor – an essential skill for self-directed, independent, lifelong learners. Elbow (1986) puts it this way, “...we can tell a little more of the truth. In doing so, it turns out that we can avoid pretending that a student’s whole performance or intelligence can be summed up in one number.”

Successful communications have four essential characteristics: (a) students take a lead role, (b) work samples or demonstrations show proof of learning, (c) students invite an audience to participate in the process, and (d) audiences take active roles and give specific feedback to learners (Gregory, Cameron, Davies, in press).

What might student involved communications look like in your school? Consider these examples. At the end of a unit of study, students in grade 11 invite an audience to review student projects and give them comments about students’ work. Students in a grade 9 English class invite an audience to school to view their writing portfolios and record responses to the work they see. The families of students from a grade 10 home economics class respond with verbal feedback after consuming a batch of cookies that were baked at home as part of a demonstration of learning. Band members from a local high school invite an audience to listen for evidence of what they have been learning and to write notes commenting on how the students did in relation to their goals. Guests arrive to view student work during the Art show hosted by fine arts students. A primary class arrives with their teacher at the local high school to observe a technology class launching their rockets, interview technology students about their projects, and afterward writes the older students personal notes giving them specific compliments. In these examples, students take a lead role, present evidence of learning, ask for and receive feedback from an audience.

Involving an audience helps focus communication and gives students a purpose (beyond their teacher’s direction) for collecting, reflecting, selecting, and presenting evidence of their learning. The communication about learning is clear and focused (from student to someone he or she knows – a specific audience); as a result it is more likely to be successful because students know more about how to communicate to different audiences they know.

Teachers are encouraged to involve students in communicating their learning in different ways because this activity supports student learning in the short term by increasing the feedback they receive, and in the long term by giving them practice presenting themselves as learners. Students are able to talk about and show evidence of their strengths and their learning needs and goals. When students learn, self-assess, and later, when ready, show their learning and receive descriptive feedback, they are developing the skills and habits of self directed, independent, lifelong learners.

Learners need choices regarding when and how to get feedback, and the feedback should come from someone whose opinion they respect. Who is the best audience for any given student? Most students know and will tell the teacher when asked. Possible audiences may include parents, other family members, neighbors, students in another class, other teachers, community members, future employers, experts in a field...someone who is interested in the student's learning and whose opinion the student values.

Involving students in communicating their learning signals a shift in roles and responsibilities. Instead of searching for evidence that students have learned, teachers now help students find evidence of their own learning. Instead of waiting for a teacher to judge their work, students now collect, organize, select, and reflect on evidence of learning so they can show proof of their learning. Instead of waiting for a summary judgment such as a report card or the large scale assessment results in the local paper, parents and others now look at the evidence of learning, listen to students explain what they've been learning, and give feedback about the learning to students. More people have an opportunity to understand what is being learned and to support students as they learn. This shift in roles and responsibilities occurs over time as teachers learn and gain expertise involving students in their own learning.

Where do busy teachers and schools find the time to involve students? Many valuable communications about learning can result from minor modifications to what is already being done in many schools. For example, parents and other audience members are accustomed to applauding at a variety of school performances ranging from French cafes or Spanish fiestas to technology fairs, science stations, dramatic productions, sporting events, band concerts and so on. Consider asking parents to do more than applaud and go a little further towards supporting student learning. Invite students to welcome the audience, explain the key learning the performance demonstrates, and ask members of the audience to record their comments on the forms provided. Once the performance is over, involve students in thanking the audience for coming and asking them to drop their comments in the box provided as they leave. Later, students (and teachers) read comments and get immediate, specific, timely feedback. These are minor shifts in current practice that do not take a lot of time. Schools already have rich traditions of students performing – why not make minor modifications and ensure the time spent is in support of student learning?

Student involved communications arise from classrooms in which students are involved in the classroom assessment process – they do not flourish in teacher centered classrooms. Teachers who are new to the process of involving students in communicating about their learning can choose different starting points such as involving students in setting criteria, assessing themselves, and collecting evidence of learning. Teachers involve students in setting criteria, assessing themselves, and collecting evidence of learning. Teachers involve students in setting criteria when they ask questions such as, “What is important in a quality science lab? What is important in an oral presentation?”

They then use students' ideas to build criteria – a clear description of what success looks like. Students use this description to guide their own learning, to give themselves feedback, to self-assess, and to collect evidence of their learning. (See Gregory, Cameron, and Davies 1997, 2000, for practical strategies for guided learning in high school and middle school classrooms.) Students who have experience being involved in the classroom assessment process are better prepared to have meaningful conversations about learning with others and more ready to be partners in collecting evidence of their learning to show others (Davies 2000; Stiggins 2000).

Many school leaders, teachers, parents, and researchers question the value of society's current emphasis on test scores at the district, state or provincial, national and international level. The current focus on more testing, more failure and retention, higher standards, more rewards, greater punishment, and tighter control over students is hurting, not helping (Barlow and Robertson 1994; Biddle and Berliner 1998; Natriello 1984; Shepard and Smith 1990; Rothman 1995). Yet, when test scores are the only thing people have to talk about, they become the focus of conversations.

Educators know test scores do not tell the whole story. Unless we give people something better to talk about, the conversations are unlikely to change. When we involve students in collecting evidence of learning and in communicating that evidence to others, we help students initiate conversations about learning that supports learning – and conversations such as these are worth having.

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Dr. Anne Davies works with educators, parents, and schools across North America. She has authored numerous books and articles and welcomes conversations about these ideas. This article is based on her latest book, *Conferencing and Reporting* (July 2001). Her email address is: anne@connect2learning.com.