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**Using Assessments Thoughtfully**

## When Students Lead Their Learning

*Ron Berger*

**Students take a lead role in understanding and communicating their progress when they reflect on their learning in front of parents and panels of experts.**

For most students in the United States, parent conferences are a mysterious event. Parents typically visit the school to make sure their child is "doing OK" and to meet the teacher, if they haven't done so already. There are few expectations about what will happen during the meeting, and most parents feel satisfied with a brief update on grades and behavior that they can report back to their child. The student is a passive recipient of information from the teacher, passed through the parent.

By the same token, the major passages that students make in schools—for instance, into middle school, high school, or college—typically depend on students accumulating seat time and credits. Students pass from one stage to another without much intellectual fanfare, often without being challenged on their growth.

But what if students led their own conferences? What if they had to provide evidence of their readiness to move on?

### Assessment—With Students at the Helm

In schools everywhere, students assess their effort, understanding, and quality of work and decide whether it's good enough: Do I understand this concept adequately? Should I study more? Do I need help? Is the quality good enough? Is my behavior OK? Can I be more focused? Can I try harder?

But how can we educators transform assessment at this level? How can we turn up the dial of what students expect of themselves?

In Expeditionary Learning schools, student-led conferences and passage presentations are part of a system of student-engaged assessment that involves students in analyzing and investing in their own growth, changing the primary role of assessment from evaluating and ranking students to motivating and equipping them to learn.

Students are also called on to defend whether they're ready to move on, asking themselves, What have I accomplished? How far have I come? and Where do I think I'm going from here?

Can we build assessment structures to unleash this capacity for student engagement and improvement in every classroom? Yes, I believe we can.

### Two Transformational Practices

Eight well-known assessment practices make up the student-engaged assessment system in Expeditionary Learning schools. The key to our success is that we've woven them together into a coherent framework. The eight practices include

- Learning targets
- Checking for understanding
- Models, critique, and descriptive feedback
- Using data with students
- Standards-based grading
- Celebrations of learning
- Student-led conferences
- Passage presentations with portfolios.

The two practices highlighted here—student-led conferences and passage presentations—are important because almost all aspects of student-engaged assessment are nested within them. Both practices feature students analyzing and presenting their own learning, a process that becomes transformational for students.

## Student-Led Conferences

"To do a student-led conference, you can be in 1st grade or 2nd grade or 3rd grade or 4th grade or 5th grade. Or you can be in kindergarten." Trinity, the kindergartner who astutely pointed this out, hails from Delaware Ridge Elementary School in Kansas City, Kansas. She started her student-led family conference by singing her class welcome song to her parents. The three of them, along with Trinity's teacher, sat on tiny blue plastic chairs around a small table. Trinity led her parents through the story of her learning. She used a portfolio of her work in reading, writing, math, science, and art to explain her progress toward reaching clear learning targets in each area.

Trinity held up her reading work and shared her first target: "I can demonstrate how to use picture clues when reading"; she used a dragonfly illustration and text to show her proficiency. "I can stretch out words to hear all the sounds," and she demonstrated this as well. When she shared her first math target—"I can find the sum of two numbers"—she explained her strategies for adding. She then turned to her mother: "Now that I taught you, maybe you can do one," and her mother attempted a problem.

Trinity shared multiple drafts of her work, demonstrating her perseverance and improvement, and explained where she needed to make more progress. She shared the writing and illustrations from her insect expert group and critiqued her own work: "What I like about this is the colors because they look beautiful. But I need to fix the symmetry, because this wing is smaller than that wing."

Trinity's presentation is, in many ways, the dream of all educators: a student with good skills and a love of learning who can explain where she's doing well and where she needs and wants to grow and improve.

For those who may feel that student-led conferences are too difficult for kindergartners, Trinity has advice: "You have to practice and learn how to do your conference before you do it. And your teacher can help you. You will practice and practice and really get better." ([Watch highlights from Trinity leading her student-led conference.](#))

And students do get better. Take Gabrielle, a 7th grader from Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School in New York City, who's already led a student conference three times. In her most recent conference, she confidently explained to her father what content clues are and how she can now support her claims with evidence from the text. She discussed how she can evaluate algebraic expressions using substitution and the order of operations. She revealed that her favorite subject is math and that science is her greatest challenge. Referring to a science quiz about the events in earth's history, she showed her father an error she made—she mixed up two events in terms of which happened first—and reflected on what she needed to learn. At the end of the conference, she shared two of her goals: to boost her learning in science and to be more prepared in all her classes. ([Watch highlights from Gabrielle's conference.](#))

What may seem like a small change—parent conferences run by students instead of teachers—can change the entire culture of a school in powerful ways. When students must report to their families what they're learning—what skills and understandings they have, what areas still challenge them, and where they hope to get to—they must understand their own learning and progress. They take pride in what they can do and take responsibility for what they need to work on. Education stops being something *done to them* and begins being something that *they are leading*.

For teachers, student-led conferences are a catalyst for better instruction. They must ensure that every student can explain his or her learning in each area. This compels teachers to monitor the growth of each student much more carefully. It's not enough to say, "Jamal is doing fine in school this term"; Jamal himself must have samples of high-quality work and assessments that show evidence that he's mastered the skills and concepts. And he must have the understanding and presentation skills to explain his growth and goals.

With effective structure and support, student-led conferences build motivation, clarity, self-direction, and critical thinking in students; and they also connect families deeply to the growth of their child and the work of the school. Schools in the Expeditionary Learning network use student-led conferences from kindergarten through the senior year of high school, and most schools report 100 percent family attendance.

What are the features of effective student-led conferences?

- *There are clear agendas and structures.* Students know exactly what they'll be sharing, for how much time, and how to facilitate the discussion so parents are actively involved.
- *Students have strong reflection and presentation skills.* They prepare and practice in class until their courtesy, speaking skills, and ability to reflect on their learning are solid.
- *A teacher helps each student prepare for the conference.* At the elementary level, this is the classroom

teacher; at the secondary level, an advisor.

- *Students demonstrate how their work is evidence of meeting learning targets*, which are based on state and Common Core standards. They also reflect on their progress in habits of scholarship, character, and artistic pursuits.
- *Student portfolios anchor the conference* and tell the story of student growth and learning. The portfolios contain early and final drafts of student work, formative and summative assessments, and evidence of meeting learning targets.
- *Students set goals* for academic and character growth, with support from their teachers and families.
- *Student accomplishments outside school are honored*, be they in sports, arts, or service learning.
- *There's a schoolwide approach to conference logistics and structures*. A student-led conference handbook can lay out all the details for scheduling, outreach, and other key decision points (for example, how often and when to hold conferences, what work to share, and how to prepare).

When schools first choose to implement student-led conferences, models can provide a vision for students, teachers, and families. We encourage schools to watch video clips of conferences and read handbooks about student-led conferences from other schools and, when possible, to visit schools and observe conferences.

The first year, things are not always easy; both students and teachers must adjust to a culture that requires evidence of growth. In our years of supporting schools to implement and improve this practice, we've identified some key challenges:

- Lack of time for teachers and students to prepare.
- Poor logistical planning (not all families attend; conferences don't always run as smoothly as they should).
- Lack of student engagement and pride (built from personally meaningful work, reflection, and rehearsal).
- Failure to ground the conference in high-priority standards and targets.
- An absence of quality student work from challenging tasks.
- A poor balance of overview evidence (assessments, broad reflections) with in-depth evidence (specific pieces of work).
- Students *describing the work* instead of *describing their learning*.
- Adults taking over the conference.

Some of these challenges are less about the structure of the conference than about the quality of the tasks students are asked to do in the classroom and the quality of student work. If the task isn't high quality, the work won't be high quality.

When a school adopts this structure, problems with rigor and quality often come to the surface. We see this is as only positive: Student-led conferences can become an engine for improving instructional practice throughout the school.

## Passage Presentations

Passage presentations, also called *presentations of learning*, *exhibitions*, or *portfolio presentations*, come from the heritage of educators Ted Sizer and Deborah Meier, who piloted the practice 30 years ago. Under this system, to graduate from high school, students need to do more than just accumulate seat time and credits. Before a panel of experts, they need to present and defend evidence that they had the required disciplinary knowledge and skills as well as the habits of mind needed to graduate. The passage presentation requires that students provide evidence of their readiness to make the passage from one phase of schooling to the next.

Matthew, a shy 6th grader at Shutesbury Elementary School in Shutesbury, Massachusetts, addressed a panel that included the superintendent, school board members, community members, and visiting educators:

*The first thing I'd like to share with you is that this was my first year in this school ... it's been a challenge for me fitting in and making friends. But I did. I came to this school with some strengths and also some weaknesses. I wasn't that strong in writing, and in math I was about two years behind grade level. But in the first few months of school, I worked really hard, and I caught up to grade level. And by now, I have actually passed it—as you can see here in my work.*

Matthew went on to share a variety of evidence of his skill level, growth, and understanding in mathematics. He shared assessments—tests he'd taken over the course of the year, with the last two tests on integers and pre-algebra with scores of 100 percent. He explained an in-depth, multiweek problem that he worked on with a team of three peers—a problem provided to the class by a professional mathematician—and each of his personal contributions to the 100 parts of the solution set. He showed with pride his winning entry in the class challenge to create a division problem with a quotient containing the longest repeating decimal.

Matthew demonstrated his reading, writing, and research skills through a series of projects connected to a study of architecture: evidence-based essays pertaining to the architecture of ancient civilizations, based on the written work of David McCauley; a profile of a fictional architect, based on an interview with a practicing architect; and colored blueprints of an originally designed and furnished home, which he drafted to scale and executed to code. He also shared two service projects connected to architecture: a playhouse that he designed and built with his peers on the playground for younger students at the school, and a six-foot-tall skyscraper dollhouse he designed and built with peers that was donated to a homeless shelter for mothers with young children.

Over the course of 20 minutes, Matthew made a compelling case that he was prepared to graduate and enter

middle school. ([Watch clips of effective passage presentations from a range of schools across the United States.](#))

Although similar to student-led conferences, these high-stakes passage presentations instill an elevated level of public speaking and interview skills that are vital to success in college and career. Family is there; teachers are there; the community is there. When students successfully complete a student-led conference, they're often proud and relieved. But when they complete a passage presentation, there are often tears or shouts or family celebrations. The passage process elevates student learning to a new level.

At Springfield Renaissance School in Springfield, Massachusetts, passages occur in the 8th, 10th, and 12th grades. The 8th grade focus is on readiness for high school; students must, among other things, write a letter to a high school teacher defending their readiness for school. The 10th grade focus is on readiness for the intensive college-focused process of the student's final two years; in addition to writing a résumé and discussing the qualities of a successful graduate, students must complete 40 hours of service learning, with a reflection on character growth. Finally, in 12th grade, the focus is on the "Senior Talk," a retrospective speech on one's path as a scholar and person.

In some schools, the panels that students speak before are small and the setting is intimate; in other schools, the panel is large, with a broad audience of family members, teachers, and friends. These differences don't matter much. What *does* matter is having a solid portfolio system across grades; high-quality work; students who are deeply invested and well prepared; strong organizational logistics (it's helpful to have a school handbook that explains these programs); and clear roles for panelists.

## Winning for the Future

A few years ago, a middle school in rural New York State decided to institute passage presentations as a graduation requirement for 8th graders. The teachers found that their whole year was different as a result: They planned more carefully to ensure that every student was successful in the key parts of every subject and that each student could explain his or her learning process. The community was coming to watch, and they'd better be ready!

When the end of the year arrived, every 8th grader presented. Simultaneous presentations took place across the building. The panels were simple—one teacher, one community member, and one high school student. At the end of the day, 8th graders hugged one another and cheered. Seeing this, one town leader, remarked, "This is like a winning a big football game—only more important!" More important, indeed.

[Ron Berger](#) is chief academic officer of Expeditionary Learning. His most recent book, coauthored with Leah Rugen and Libby Woodfin, is *Leaders of Their Own Learning: Transforming Schools Through Student-Engaged Assessment* (Jossey-Bass, 2014).

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