



Innovation in Practice

A Student-Centered
Learning Toolkit

by teachers / for teachers

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Please visit us at theteachercollaborative.org. If you would like to get in touch, [send us an email](#) or visit us on social media @theteachercolab.

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¹ Additional information about teachers who contributed tools is included at the end of each tool within the Toolkit.

About The Teacher Collaborative

The Teacher Collaborative is a non-profit organization that aims to connect and support PreK-12 educators across Massachusetts. We do this by offering professional learning opportunities and creating spaces (in-person and virtual) where educators can connect with one another. Our mission is to empower educators to reimagine the teaching profession and ultimately transform learning to be more excellent and equitable for all students.

We offer high-quality professional learning opportunities that are personalized, relevant to a large number of educators, and collaborative—bringing together educators from different schools, grades, and backgrounds to learn, innovate, and problem solve together. Our core programs include our Co-Labs; educator events focused on leadership, networking, and learning; and a successful podcast.

About the Student-Centered Learning Co-Lab: The Teacher Collaborative’s signature program, **Co-Labs**, provides teachers the opportunity to collaborate, innovate, and problem-solve together. It was for and within the 2022 Student-Centered Learning Leadership Co-Lab that this Toolkit was initially developed. Teachers from across Massachusetts with a common interest in being at the vanguard of Student-Centered Learning came together to define and describe the principles and practices within the organization’s Student-Centered Learning (SCL) framework in ways that were relevant to their educator peers. Then, the teachers developed and piloted activities, lessons, units, and tools that exemplified the SCL principles and practices and prepared these resources for sharing. This Toolkit comprises, first and foremost, the work of these teachers.

Introduction to this Toolkit

This Toolkit is divided into four chapters, each of which focuses on one of the core principles of Student-Centered Learning (SCL), a concept that is further defined in the next section. Each chapter contains:

- A definition of the principle.
- Some key considerations for educators to support their growth in that area.
- An exploration of each of the practices that embody that principle.
- One or more teacher-developed tools (lessons, activities, units, and more) that exemplify each practice.

The writing in each chapter was initially drafted by teachers and carefully edited with feedback from The Teacher Collaborative’s team members and consultants.

The team worked to maintain fidelity to the content developed by the teachers and to maintain the individual teachers’ voices as much as possible. As a result, readers will notice some inconsistencies from chapter to chapter—both in style and in substance—which we hope only enriches the Toolkit, as it enables each teacher’s work to shine through. Moreover, many of the tools and resources linked to this Toolkit are taken wholly from units and activities that teachers implemented; as a result, they may not be templated or edited.

We encourage teachers using this Toolkit to borrow inspiration from the resources provided and the accompanying guidance; but ultimately to make these tools “their own” and build something new that is inspired by contributors’ tools, rather than taking tools wholesale. This is both because—like anything authentically field-developed—they remain works in progress; and also because teacher-provided lessons may not be as effective if they are not carefully tailored to new contexts, communities, and classrooms.

With these caveats in mind, we hope that educators of all kinds find inspiration, kinship, and support throughout this Toolkit. Each one of your innovations contributes to pushing the field of Student-Centered Learning forward in Massachusetts—something that benefits us all.

About Student-Centered Learning

Our Framework

Student-Centered Learning is a pedagogical approach that puts the needs, interests, and goals of students at the center, allowing these aspects to drive instruction. It is organized around four “principle domains”:

- Authentic Experiences
- Student Agency
- Assessment for Learning
- Flexible Structures

The 12 Core Practices (surrounding the principles) are distinct ways in which teachers can pursue increasingly student-centered pedagogy. Each Core Practice exists on a continuum, meaning that the goal is always growth rather than a single point of accomplishment. The strongest educators include all 12 Core Practices in their teaching, and they never stop learning and improving.



A Note on Student-Centered Learning from the Editor (*Diana Lebeaux*)

When I first heard the term “Student-Centered Learning” used, it was in the university context. While I was a teacher, sitting in a room full of other teachers, it was hard to see the term as anything other than a theoretical way of describing pedagogy that many of us, joining the profession in the late ‘aughts,’ saw as a kind of Platonic ideal. Ideal—both in the sense that it was something to which to aspire, and in the sense that it would always feel a bit unachievable in the real context of our lives as teachers.

Student-Centered Learning (called SCL by its superfans) was generally defined as an equity-focused pedagogy that allowed the interests, needs, and goals of the learners to drive instruction. When I left direct work with students in 2016 to consult with teachers and leaders in the non-profit sphere, the term had picked up steam. Progressive educators, pre-pandemic, vacillated between embracing this brave new world of student-centered personalization—and becoming terrified of the ways in which the concept was co-opted, diluted, and—inevitably—weakened. What had first been a Platonic ideal, reserved for theory and the ivory tower, and then had been—for a tantalizing moment—the darling of the education vanguard, was on the cusp of becoming almost meaningless.

Like many other things, the pandemic changed all this. Student-Centered Learning was no longer treated like something abstract (or, worse, a commodity to be marketed) and instead became embedded in the DNA of strong, 21st-century teaching practices. Effective pandemic teaching required Student-Centered Learning in order to work, along with its underpinning principles: flexibility, innovative assessment, student agency, and authenticity. Approaches like culturally-responsive teaching and technology-infused practices were no longer niche interests but, finally, recognized as essential to strong, dynamic teaching.

What saved Student-Centered Learning wasn’t a bunch of marketing executives agreeing on a shared definition, or the concept reaching some kind of tipping point in educational think tanks. What saved Student-Centered Learning was the way in which teachers, increasingly, were drawn to the practices that it represented. During the pandemic, SCL moved distinctly from theory to practice all around the country, as teachers put their fierce energy to the gigantic task of finding new ways to reach students where they were every day. A new recognition of systemic inequities and injustices, combined with the challenges of reaching students during remote and hybrid instruction, both necessitated and enabled so-called innovative approaches to become standard.

This didn’t happen automatically, of course. Throughout this period of flux, teachers found new reasons and new ways to collaborate. Where one teacher pioneered a performance assessment, others iterated on that approach to build their own. Groups of teachers found new ways to bring authentic and engaging topics into the classroom and volunteers piloted it until the approaches were refined. Amidst this energy, The Teacher Collaborative’s Co-Labs became more exciting than ever, providing a home base for “collaborative innovation” for teachers across Massachusetts.

Although I came to The Teacher Collaborative only a year and a half ago, I have found countless examples of student-centered principles at work with our teachers. And it is these examples, straight from practitioners,

that contributed to the design of The Teacher Collaborative’s new Student-Centered Learning framework. We see this framework as the touchstone for what is still an ongoing conversation. As we continue to create Co-Labs, platforms, and events where teachers can learn and problem-solve together, we hope that the framework serves as a kind of common language. It’s not a single answer; it is a kind of question to which every teacher has an answer of their own: in the world of student-centered educational practices, where is your growing edge?

The pandemic didn’t save Student-Centered Learning; the pandemic simply provided the perfect storm in which it could be forged. What did save Student-Centered Learning was that teachers wrested it from the hands of those fighting over it and made it their own. In the hands of practitioners, we hope that it keeps on being more than just an ideal. Instead, we envision a kind of continuum on which each educator is actively growing—and in turn, making schools a better place, even when the pandemic becomes a distant memory.

— Diana Lebeaux, Senior Director of Programs, The Teacher Collaborative

PRINCIPLE

Flexible Structures

Defining This Principle: Classroom “structure” describes how teachers design tasks, share authority, and evaluate students’ progress. In a student-centered classroom, educators strive to create a pedagogical framework that includes Flexible Structures – championing personalization that supports learning outcomes, advancing metacognitive learning strategies, and creating a positive and powerful classroom climate.

The goal of Flexible Structures is to establish a learning environment that is inclusive and accessible to all types of learners. It centers the students’ identities in the classroom and grounds practices in the recognition that each learner has unique needs and therefore benefits from personalized learning opportunities. The framework calls for creating a curriculum that provides multiple means of representation to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge, multiple means of expression to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know, and multiple means of engagement to tap into learners’ varied interests and motivate them to learn. Teachers in a classroom defined by Flexible Structures examine the learning environment and the presence of barriers to learning—such as the design of the curricular goals, assessments, methods, and materials—and see the that learning environment can be enabling or disabling in ways that are readily addressed by ensuring that students have what they need to flexibly meet learning goals.

Essential Questions Connected with This Principle

- Are lesson activities and assessments designed to provide different types of learners with varying paths to success?
- Do all learners know their learning goals?
- Is student progress mastery-based, and are students enabled to learn at their own pace until they can demonstrate core competencies?
- Is technology embedded in the classroom in ways that support personalization?
- Does each student have access to the curriculum and materials in ways that are enabling?
- Is the design of physical spaces a mechanism for supporting Student-Centered Learning and personalized instruction?

Student-Centered Practices Aligned with this Principle

- Technology-Infused Practices
- Universal Design Practices
- Competency-Based Progression²

² Competency-Based Progression is a complex **Core Practice** that blends aspects of Assessment for Learning and Flexible Structures, as well as other principles.

PRACTICE

Technology-Infused Practices

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE

A Technology-Infused Practice integrates technology to make learning personalized and differentiated to match students' needs and tailor learning to their interests. This practice supports flexibility in the classroom by:

- Offering new mediums to construct and demonstrate learning, as well as to access specialized content.
- Enabling differentiation (students can use technology to learn at a personalized pace, in topics of their own interest).
- Supporting a blended “anytime, anywhere” approach, in which students can access learning both within and outside of the classroom.

Moreover, technology-infused classrooms support accessibility in a variety of ways, such as connecting students to peers, resources, and communities that are physically distant and by providing adaptive tools that support those with learning differences in accessing the curriculum, such as speech-to-text and text-to-speech, translation tools, and more.

Some Technology-Infused Practices are teacher-led, such as when teachers use technology to help them demonstrate content, while others are completely individualized. In a technology-infused classroom, the classroom teacher can meet students’ needs in the moment and is available to support questions as they arise; or they can work with a small group of students directly while others progress with online projects. This blended approach fosters independent and active learning on the students’ part while allowing for differentiation in many areas: *e.g.*, accessibility, content creation choice, ownership and independence; as well as providing a flexible space for divergent thinking.³

Classrooms do not need to be completely online or rely fully on computers to be technology-infused. Blended Learning⁴ classrooms fluidly move among “analog” and “digital” approaches, some of which employ targeted technological tools and approaches. When classrooms operate in fully blended ways, they allow students to work synchronously or asynchronously, as well as giving them the flexibility to demonstrate proficiency of their learning at their own terms in their preferred environment—often with a Learning Management System (LMS) such as [Canvas](#), [Buzz](#), or [Schoology](#) to guide them.

³ Divergent thinking is when students can creatively respond to a prompt with any variety of approaches and ideas, in contrast to *convergent thinking*, in which there are limited acceptable answers.

⁴ Blended Learning is a specific technology-infused approach in which all students have a mix of in-person and online activities and approaches, with the teacher curating tools and activities across a variety of modalities to ensure that students have access to whatever approach best suits the intended learning.

Even in less immersive classrooms, there are a variety of technological tools that can support Student-Centered Learning and flexibility. Digital collaboration tools, such as [Google Docs](#), allow for students to conveniently give and receive feedback with their peers. Individual differentiation and attention to student-specific needs is optimal when using this tool. Tools such as [Padlet](#) and [Jamboard](#) also support collaboration and demonstration of learning; while others, such as [PearDeck](#), focus more on interactive, personalized content delivery. Thanks in part to the pandemic, which pushed most Massachusetts teachers and their peers across the country to more than a year of hybrid learning, there are myriad tools available. In fact, one of the primary challenges for many tech-ready teachers and classrooms is making the right choices from amidst all the possible tools.

Teachers seeking to ensure that the tools that their school infrastructure (and budget) support also suit their goals and needs (and those of their students) can often benefit from frameworks such as the [SAMR model](#) of technology integration. This model supports an aim that is the hallmark of strong technology-infused practice: allowing the learning goals to drive the technology used, rather than the other way around.

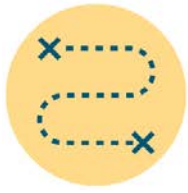
Key Considerations for Implementation in the Classroom:

- How can I create equity in my classroom using technology?
- How can access to information be differentiated to support all students?
- How can I support individual learning and encourage students to communicate with each other for support?
- What choices are available for students to navigate their own learning to create content?
- What digital platforms, tools, and systems does my school's infrastructure and budget support?
- What technological tools can best support our classroom's learning goals?

Teacher Spotlight & Exemplar Tool:

- "Using a Hyperdoc to Create a Flexible Learning Environment" by Jenn Fredo

TECHNOLOGY-INFUSED TOOL



Using a Hyperdoc to Create a Flexible Learning Environment

by Jenn Fredo

TOOL DESCRIPTION

An exemplar “hyperdoc” unit and accompanying rubrics, both to demonstrate the successful use of hyperdocs and as a guide for students in practicing and learning about the variety of technologies available to them in a tech-rich classroom.

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

These exemplars were developed for a public middle school computer science classroom in a large suburban district.

TOOL & LINKS

- [Computer Science Stations \(Exemplar Hyperdoc\)](#)
- [Final Project Templates and Rubrics](#) for the above hyperdoc unit

About This Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

A “hyperdoc” is a Google Doc with many video links, visuals, and response areas to facilitate an individualized learning environment. The purpose of the hyperdoc is to conveniently house and collate all the relevant materials, resources, and mini learning modules for students to learn at their own pace. For a tech-heavy class, such as in a computer science class, students often get overwhelmed by the amount of information and materials they have to digitally track. By organizing these all together in a hyperdoc, we can remove the inconvenience and challenge of organization so that students can focus on their learning. Thus, having many resources available allows students to work independently. This frees up the teacher to work with students one on one or in small groups to target reluctant independent learners and guide and encourage students who need it.

Guidance for Exploring this Resource

- Think of what technology tools are available to your students (Google Translate, Text-To-Speech, different digital versions of an assignment for different levels, synchronous collaboration, etc.). Embed the instructions for these capabilities somewhere in your hyperdoc.
- Add resources, videos, etc. to foster learning content, but make sure to have an answer section for each resource where students can be responsible for the content presented.

- Have students create a sample of the content learned to upload to the document as evidence of learning. This is where your students who are confused will lean on their classmates as they have to produce something.

Teacher Narrative

When thinking about the best way to teach computer science to reluctant students, my colleagues and I created a hyperdoc [see the tool linked above].

We had four platforms for students to discover, and separated each part of the hyperdoc to correlate with each station: Creating a Virtual Reality Tour, Programming a Micro:bit, Coding an App and Programming a Robot. Students were put in groups and rotated around the room, learning each platform with support from the well-organized resources in the hyperdoc as well as the other students in their group. Students could work at their own pace and use technological aids, such as text-to-speech, Google Translate, etc.; but the proximity to their group of classmates also fostered a learning community where they could rely on one another to troubleshoot and answer questions as they learned together. The hyperdoc, then, was designed for students to not only learn from the resources, but also to collaborate as a team. Students turned into leaders and paced themselves according to their ability.

The benefit of students working asynchronously at each station allows the teacher flexibility to check in with students who need additional support. Some students with an IEP may need more direct instructional support, and so I was able to create a small group and lead instruction step by step. Other students just needed a check-in to ensure they were staying on task. By having the resources available and by holding students accountable to upload evidence and document their work at each station, I knew that students learned within each content area.

Students had to ask questions in order to complete tasks. If I was unavailable, then they knew to turn to a classmate, helping to foster a true student-centered environment. Some students emerged as leaders as they grasped concepts quickly. This was not always the student I expected, and it empowered them as they gained confidence in their learning.

At the end of this four-station rotation⁵ learning computer science, students were then asked to choose their favorite platform and code a program that would help someone in a real-world situation. This deeper project choice puts students in the driver's seat to their own learning and interests. Some stations were naturally more engaging to others and some stations were more understood by the students themselves. The power of choice of content also engaged students. Some students programmed an app to learn English while others programmed a robot to do soccer drills. Allowing students to tailor the project to their interests while utilizing their newly-learned content was a double win.

⁵ **Station Rotation** is another example of a Flexible Structure. In it, students rotate around the room to different learning experiences at various "stations," some of which may be hands-on or interactive, some of which may be independent, and others may involve direct instruction or discussion facilitated by the teacher.

Creating a hyperdoc where students are held accountable for their learning, and then given the choice to show their learning, allows for a flexible and individualized environment for the student and for the teacher. This practice and pedagogy takes work to set up, but once in place it is invaluable as a teacher to be given the flexibility to meet the needs of your students. Grouping students to work at stations fosters a natural collaboration as they are purposefully placed around the room to support each other. These two practices together create a rigorous, student-centered atmosphere.

MEET THE AUTHOR

My name is Jenn Fredo, and I am a 6th and 7th grade technology teacher at Barnstable Intermediate School. I create student-centered lessons to give students opportunities to show their understanding of the new technologies presented as well as the chance to collaborate with peers to share ideas and inspire each other.



PRACTICE

Universal Design Practices

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE

“Universal Design is design that’s usable by all people to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.”—Rob Mace (North Carolina State University’s Universal Design Institute)

Universal Design (UD), as described above, is an approach to design that increases the potential for developing a better quality of life for a wide range of individuals.⁶ It is a design process that enables and empowers a diverse population by improving human performance, health and wellness, and social participation. It creates products, systems, and environments to be as usable as possible by as many people as possible regardless of age, ability or situation. Universal Design is an enduring design approach grounded in the belief that the broad range of human ability is ordinary, not special. Universal Design addresses barriers faced by people with disabilities, older people, children, and other populations that are typically overlooked in the design process (Steinfeld and Maisel).⁷

In education, our overall goals are centered around empowering students (especially those often marginalized by school systems) to engage with curricular content in a way that increases their competency, enhances their social participation, and deepens their comprehension. Employing a Universal Design practice can help achieve these goals. A Universal Design approach seeks to reach and engage all students regardless of age, identity, ability, background, language, current and prior academic achievement, or interest level in the content at hand.

Universal Design Practices support personalization in an ever-changing world by ensuring accessibility and inclusion for all types of learners. By designing instruction, environment, and tools with the intention of accommodating our most dynamic and diverse learners, we are centering students’ needs before they step into our space.

Designing at the Margins. *What if instead of designing for the “average” student and accommodating needs outside of that “average” student, we proactively consider needs in a way that we are set up for flexibility and access across as many differences as possible? As educators, we constantly support and accommodate our students. Oftentimes, we wait to see what they may need according to their IEPs or their individual learning profiles. What if we did that before they even arrived at our door? What if we designed our spaces and instruction and support and feedback in a way that was as inclusive as possible?*

⁶ It is also known as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in a school-based context, and is similar to Targeted Universalism in other fields, such as philanthropy and social work.

⁷ Steinfeld, Edward and Jordana Maisel. *Universal Design: Creating Inclusive Environments*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2012.

Teachers that employ Universal Design (for Learning) into their classrooms make different choices than their peers. Instead of assuming that students will have sufficient healthy social connections, the UD teacher will proactively incorporate relationship-building and intentional social-emotional learning activities into the classroom. A teacher employing Universal Design will consider the students most struggling within their classroom when designing any unit, knowing that all students will benefit from an accessible, inclusive approach targeting those at the margins.⁸ A UD-literate teacher will ensure that students' intellectual energy is spent in working toward the desired learning outcomes, rather than in understanding the assignment or accessing the content.⁹

At the heart of Student-Centered Learning is the priority of the learner before the content. The flexibility to cater to the diverse needs of learners heightens the experience for all learners. Universal Design honors this flexibility by urging educators to design inclusive and accommodating structures from the onset of their planning. UD also supports the Flexible Structures principle specifically, with its emphasis on student choice at all stages of learning.

Taking into consideration some important adaptations from the onset of our work, we can better serve and include all of our diverse learners. That is the essence of Universal Design.

Key Considerations for Implementation in the Classroom:

1. **Space:** Is the physical space of the classroom accessible, suitable for the variety of seating and working preferences and needs of the learners?
2. **Engagement and Expression:** Are learners provided with a variety of ways (platforms, modalities, materials, styles) of accessing and engaging with the curriculum?
3. **Content Representation:** Are there multiple ways for students with different needs and preferences to access the new learning content? Are all resources clear and well-organized?
4. **Demonstration of Learning:** Do students have multiple ways of demonstrating what they have learned that ensure that there are no unnecessary barriers?

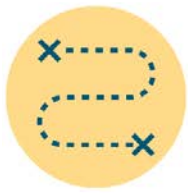
Teacher Spotlight & Exemplar Tool:

- “How to Set Up an Inclusive Environment in Any Learning Space” by Amy Moylan

⁸ A frequently-used metaphor for universal design is the “on-ramp.” Physical ramps, perhaps originally designed to ensure access for those with wheelchairs, also benefit young children, parents with baby strollers, the elderly, those on crutches with sprained ankles, and countless others. Similarly, on-ramps within lessons or units targeting the most marginalized students will also benefit many others.

⁹ According to [CAST](https://udlguidelines.cast.org/), an organization with widely-recognized expertise in Universal Design for Learning, UD (or what they call UDL) targets three areas—means of *Engagement*, means of *Representation*, and means of *Action & Expression*—and in each ensures maximum choice along with maximum clarity to help ensure access. For more information and a helpful infographic, see <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>

UNIVERSAL DESIGN TOOL



How to Set Up an Inclusive Environment in Any Learning Space

by Amy Moylan

TOOL DESCRIPTION

Photos of a highly accessible and Universally-Designed classroom paired with charted guidelines to support teachers in considering and applying Universal Design within their own classroom spaces, based on students' demonstrated needs.

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

The exemplar classroom is a first grade classroom in a public urban elementary school; however, much of the guidance is more broadly applicable.

TOOL & LINKS

- [Universal Design Photo Examples and Guidelines](#)

About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

Please see the photo examples and guiding chart linked above to accompany the prompts for deeper thinking below.

1. Consider: Are you creating a space that is set up to include all kinds of learners?
2. How can you shift, add, change or adapt an aspect of that space to cater to all the work in that space?
3. Consider one or more of the following questions to these aspects:
 - A. Seating: Is it varied for body types and movement feedback?
 - B. Lighting: Is the neon lighting potentially over-stimulating to light sensitive learners?
 - C. Entrance and flow: Can someone enter your space in different modes while holding things and move around freely?
 - D. Access to content: Can learners hear, touch, see and experience the resources and content presented?
 - E. Representation: Do your books, signs, and displays represent varied cultures, genders, and sources?

Teacher Narrative

Imagine walking into any learning space and thinking, “Wow, this space was meant for me. I feel seen and validated and accommodated. It is set up to meet all of my needs and learning considerations.”

A shift in my career came when I realized that relying solely on student learning plans held me back from more proactively considering how I could design a space that was inclusive of all learners, not just those in need of specific modifications or accommodations. To accommodate student needs based on their learning profiles, I was missing a proactive opportunity to meet the needs of most of my learners before they even entered my classroom.

One of my priorities is designing a trauma-informed, accessible, welcoming classroom space for my first graders. “The ability to self-regulate—to strategically modulate one’s emotional reactions or states in order to be more effective at coping and engaging with the environment—is a critical aspect of human development” (CAST).¹⁰

I learned that in order to support students with neurodiverse needs, I needed to learn what kinds of stimuli were detrimental and what was helpful. I needed to learn how to be proactive in my approach to set up a welcoming environment and teach self-regulation. Students presenting with difficulty regulating their bodies benefited from a set up with flexibility built in. They could choose which kind of seating helped them focus and learn from the beginning of their classroom experience in first grade. Instead of waiting for dysregulation and adjusting in response, this approach served as a proactive support with a message of inclusivity for an expectation of the propensity to move in different ways. The guidelines linked above and the accompanying photos show a few ways in which these supports benefitted my students.

I found out that what was helpful and accommodating for some was helpful and accommodating for all. Some students discovered learning styles with flexibility and ease where they wouldn’t have been able to explore that otherwise.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Amy Moylan (she/they) has been teaching first grade for 22 years. Amy currently teaches first grade at the Baldwin School in Cambridge, MA. Amy’s quest to create the most inclusive environment possible lends itself to their dynamic project-based learning approach.



¹⁰ See: <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/engagement/self-regulation>.

PRACTICE

Competency-Based Progression

Important note: Competency-Based Progression is a complex Core Practice that blends aspects of Assessment for Learning and Flexible Structures, as well as other principles. The complexity of competency-based education (CBE)¹¹ is such that this chapter can only touch the surface of the practice. We recommend that teachers new to CBE consider exploring it in more depth, perhaps with the aid of some of the resources provided at the end of this chapter.

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE

Competency-Based Progression is an approach to teaching and learning in which students progress toward universal broad goals but with varied pacing, modalities, and pathways. Competency-Based Progression is a feature of the broader CBE pedagogical approach. This practice is about ensuring that students move on within the curriculum only once they have demonstrated proficiency—and it includes the expectation that educators provide the support, flexibility, and other student-centered features so that all students can and do achieve proficiency and continue to advance.

Competency-Based Progression focuses on each student’s starting point with the material, and pushes them into their Zone of Proximal Development. The Zone of Proximal Development is defined by Billings and Walqui as “the space between what a learner can do without assistance and what a learner can do with adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.”¹² Students are moving forward from their unique starting point at their own pace towards clearly defined goals. Students are regularly given opportunities to demonstrate mastery, the ability to perform a skill independently, through a variety of assessment strategies, and then move on to their next goal.

Competency-Based Progression is essential to Student-Centered Learning because each student is unique, requiring different periods of time with various skills (pacing) as well as different pathways, tools, and modalities to support them in demonstrating proficiency with broad Competency goals.¹³ Elementary schools assume that students in a particular grade all begin the year at the same place, progress through the year at the same pace, and end the year at the same place; however, the truth is that students enter with their own previous knowledge and level of mastery, learn at their own pace, and demonstrate mastery

¹¹ Competency-Based Education is also known as Proficiency-Based or Mastery-Based Learning in different contexts, but they are used relatively synonymously. Standards-based learning is different, as standards are significantly more specific and prolific than competencies, and standards-based learning does not always imply Competency-Based Progression, a hallmark of CBE (and its synonyms).

¹² Billings, Elsa, & Walqui, Aída (n.d.). *Zone of Proximal Development: An Affirmative Perspective in Teaching ELLs*. WestEd. Available at this link as of August 2022.

¹³ A deep dive into what Competencies (the broad goals) look like and how they fit into the context of standards, visions for graduates, and other features of student-centered and more traditional schools is beyond the scope of this Toolkit. However, many featured resources at the end of this chapter may be useful to educators hoping to learn more about these critical features of high-fidelity Competency-Based Education (CBE).

a variety of ways. By acknowledging this reality, teachers can prepare for a wider range of mastery levels and several ways to assess competency.

Flexible Structures around small groups, choice in assessment, partner pairing, and leveled classwork (such as those Universal Design structures described previously) all allow students to grow from where they are rather than where the average student “should” be. Instead of grouping students by a perceived general ability, Competency-Based Progression allows the teacher to see how each student is doing with each individual standard and, ultimately, with their long-term progression toward the school’s high-priority competency goals. For example, some students may excel at fraction concepts while needing extra practice with decimal place value.

Meanwhile, in whole-class projects and classwork, teachers can add scaffolds for students who need an assist while adding extensions for students who need a push. As a result, all members of the class are more engaged and can grapple with concepts. Furthermore, mastery can be shown in a variety of ways, from demonstrating their understanding on a written test, to verbally explaining a concept, to a full project on the subject. Flexible Structures allow for teachers to meet individual student needs and preferences rather than fitting students into the same box.

Unfortunately, high-fidelity Competency-Based Education is very rare in Massachusetts and is still found only in pockets across the U.S. However, there are many schools and even individual teachers at the vanguard of CBE, infusing their classrooms with practices that enable Competency-Based Progression. These approaches can still be beneficial even if not (yet) supported by a broader, competency-based system at the school, district, or state level—though the potential for positive impact is greater within a supportive context.

Competency-Based Progression, in the context of a classroom with Flexible Structures more broadly, as well as other principles of Student-Centered Learning, allows a teacher to focus on each student’s individual academic strengths and areas of growth, while nevertheless ensuring that all students are held to the same broad competencies and prepared rigorously for life after schooling. In short, well-executed Competency-Based Progression ensures that both equity and excellence go hand in hand.

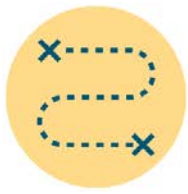
Key Considerations for Implementation in the Classroom

- What does “competency” mean in my classroom? How many ways can students demonstrate they understand the material?
- Are all of my students generally in the same place, or are their Zones of Proximal Development wildly different?
- How am I tracking mastery?
- How am I using my data to direct individual student learning?
- How do I support struggling students and students who have already shown mastery?

Teacher Spotlight & Exemplar Tool

- “Student-Centered, Mastery-Based and Self-Paced Learning in the English Learner Classroom” by Alicia Serafin

COMPETENCY-BASED PROGRESSION TOOL



Student-Centered, Mastery-Based and Self-Paced Learning in the English Learner Classroom

by Alicia Serafin

TOOL DESCRIPTION

A set of examples from an elementary ESL unit that demonstrate student-centered and Competency-Based Progression approaches, including a mastery check and mastery tracker as well as samples from the teacher's curriculum. The mastery check is given to individual students when each is ready, and the teacher uses the tracker to indicate how the student is progressing. These artifacts are included comprehensively to illustrate the competency-based progression.¹⁴

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

These materials were developed for first grade English Learners in a suburban elementary school, aligned with a first grade "living things" essential question and a focus on the skill of comparison.

TOOL & LINKS

- [Sample Mastery Check](#)
- [Mastery Tracker](#)
- [Sample Interactive Deck from the Teacher's Unit](#)
- [Sample Student-Facing Video From The Teacher's Unit](#) available to students via a Learning Management System

About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

As seen in the links above, I created a video series that aligns to a first grade Living Things Essential Question for my ESL students. The presentation deck was used in a backwards design approach and is incorporated in the video. My first grade ESL students create their own research-based top-down web graphic organizer to compare as part of this series of standards-based lessons.

The excerpt from a progress tracker and a mastery check sample with multiple options are also included to illustrate the competency-based progression. These artifacts align with both Competency-Based Progression and Universal Design Practices to ensure accessibility for all learners.

The presentation decks (one of which is linked above) were used in a backwards design approach and are incorporated in each video in the lesson series. My first grade ESL students create their own research-based

¹⁴ N.B. While this tool provides an excellent example of mastery-based learning, it falls in the context of a standards-based rather than fully competency-based school. As a result, students progress toward required standards but not necessarily toward broader competencies.

top-down web graphic organizer to compare as part of these standards-based lessons. These videos and presentation decks can also be used to guide students through the graphic organizer development process.

The excerpt from a progress tracker illustrates the Competency-Based Progression. The mastery check is given to individual students when each is ready to demonstrate mastery.

This competency-based approach works for small groups of students as well in the classroom. If students are absent or need review, the personalized videos are available for them to watch again at their own pace. Students only take mastery checks when each is ready individually. One of the great benefits is the time and space this approach leaves for teachers and students to conference either individually to discuss progress or in small groups when reteaching is needed.

Teacher Narrative

As an ESL Teacher in a low-incidence district, I primarily work with ESL students in small groups outside of their classroom spaces. I teach at the elementary level and tend to work within classrooms to co-teach and then work with small groups for Reader's Workshop and Writer's Workshop.

These presentation and video curriculum materials leverage best practices involved in the Modern Classroom approach (blended instruction, self-paced structures, and mastery-based learning).

I planned, recorded, and enhanced these presentation decks and short video artifacts to deliver new content to students. The excerpt from a progress tracker and a mastery check sample with multiple options are also included to demonstrate the Competency-Based Progression.

Although developing one's own educator videos is time-intensive, especially initially, it is well worth the effort to personalize learning for each student and improve learning opportunities. While some students might be absent, others benefit from watching the content presented multiple times by a familiar instructor who leverages familiar routines. Sharing these videos with families through the use of a Learning Management System provides opportunities for students to watch at home, too. This sharing of resources can strengthen the home-school relationship, especially as caregivers learn more about the content their students are learning.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Alicia Serafin currently teaches English as a Second Language in the Wilmington, Massachusetts Public Elementary Schools. She has been teaching ESL for over 10 years. Alicia is also a Department of Elementary and Secondary Education-approved Professional Development Provider.



SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Written Publications & Works Cited

- Billings, Elsa, & Walqui, Aída (n.d.). *Zone of Proximal Development: An Affirmative Perspective in Teaching ELLs*. WestEd (online). Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.
- Burgstahler, Sheryl, PhD. *Universal Design in Education: Principles and Applications*. Seattle: Do-It, University of Washington, 2009. Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.
- Coker, Lindsay. *Design for the Margins First*. Center for Learner Equity (online), June 17, 2020. Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.
- Rao, K. & Torres, C. *Technology and UDL*. Schoolvirtually.org (online), 2020. Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.
- Steinfeld, Edward and Jordana Maisel. *Universal Design: Creating Inclusive Environments*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2012.
- Sturgis, Chris. *Henry County Schools: Four Big Takeaways*. Aurora Institute (online), 2016. Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.
- Terada, Youki. *A Powerful Model for Understanding Good Tech Integration*. Edutopia (online), May 4, 2020. Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.
- Wanamaker, Patti. *The Balancing Act: Technology-Infused Classrooms*. Milady (online), May 13, 2016. Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.

Other Web-Based Resources (and technology tools)

- [Blended Learning Toolkit](#) by the University of Central Florida, a website that includes resources, principles, blog posts, research, and even online courses about Blended Learning.
- [CBE360 Survey Toolkit](#) by the College and Career Readiness and Success Center at the American Institutes for Research, which enables school leaders to survey students and teachers about Competency-Based Education and aligned student-centered practices.
- [CompetencyWorks](#), a hub for Competency-Based Education with a host of resources, managed by the Aurora Institute.
- [Developing and Applying Proficiencies](#), a self-paced and free online course that supports educators in creating a set of competencies and better understanding how to use them, published by the Professional Learning Network, part of the Vermont Agency of Education.
- [Google Docs](#), a popular online word processing application that allows for collaboration.
- [Jamboard](#), an application in the Google online suite that allows multiple participants to interact on a blank online whiteboard/chalkboard space with pictures, text, sticky notes, and other features.

- Learning Management Systems mentioned in this chapter: [Canvas](#) (by Instructure), [Buzz](#) (by Agilix), and [Schoolology](#) (by Powerschool)
- [Learning Platform Comparison Chart](#), a chart by [2Revolutions](#) that looks at the various features of learning platforms such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), Student Information Systems (SIS), Data Management Software, and others, exploring the features that different brands offer..
- [Padlet](#), an online interactive application that allows for organized “sticky note” boards, curated resource collections, and other pages that blend images and text
- [PearDeck](#), an application that supports teachers in building interactive decks for learning delivery and guided student work, allowing embedded multimedia resources and other interactive features
- [Proficiency-Based Learning Framework and Tools](#) by Great Schools Partnership defines and contextualizes what Proficiency-Based Learning is—for all intents and purposes, this is synonymous with Competency-Based Education.
- [UDL Guidelines](#), developed by the Universal Design for Learning experts at Cast, succinctly describe UDL (or UD) with the aid of a helpful infographic for educators and includes links to more in-depth resources
- [What Is an Infused Classroom](#), a short article by Holly Clark on a website focused on technology-infused teaching practices; the linked article includes fun and illustrative images about concepts related to technology-infused learning.

PRINCIPLE

Assessment for Learning

Defining this Principle: Assessments are an important part of the teaching and learning process. Teachers need to gauge skill and understanding of content, but traditional assessment methods don't always allow students to demonstrate the myriad ways they may have internalized their learning.

Student-centered Assessment for Learning creates opportunities to dig deeper than traditional assessments. Instead of viewing assessment as consecutive to learning—something that happens when learning is complete—a student-centered classroom views learning as continuous. Assessment, then, is an additional opportunity for growth in knowledge and skill; it becomes a tool for learning. In their work, *Assessing Learning*, Andrade, Huff and Brooke found that assessment is student-centered when it is “balanced,” meaning that summative, formative, and interim assessments are given. Balanced assessment for learning includes varied assessments, performance assessments, and reflection opportunities.¹⁵

The role that Assessment for Learning (as opposed to assessment of learning) plays in Student-Centered Learning (SCL) is twofold. First, it creates a variety of opportunities for students to show what they know. In doing so, they learn to solve problems, express creativity, collaborate, work towards goals, and build self awareness amongst other things. They gain additional skills through the process of completing an assessment. Second, assessments for learning give us key information about who our students are, not just about their learning.¹⁶ Knowing our students is the critical foundation of SCL, since “when assessment is student centered, it can promote learning and even motivation. Moreover, assessment is essential to student-centered approaches to learning, which value differentiation, active engagement, and self-management as critical to learning.”¹⁷

In a student-centered classroom, assessment is not pegged to a high-stakes exam nor associated with grades alone. The teacher crafts frequent and varied opportunities to gather information about the students and their learning, ensures that the students are assessed in how they apply their learning in real ways, and helps students to self-assess regularly. When done well, assessment stops causing the jitters (in teachers and students!) and becomes a highly-nuanced system that supports relationship building, informs planning, and documents the learning in real time. In short, rather than tugging the learning along reluctantly, it becomes absorbed into the fabric of the learning itself.

Essential Questions Connected with This Principle

- What might it look like to plan assessments *for* learning as opposed to assessments *of* learning?

¹⁵ Andrade, Heidi, Kristen Huff and Georgia Brooke. *Assessing Learning*. Students at the Center Series (online), April 2012. Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.

¹⁶ Miller, Andrew. *Using Assessment to Create Student-Centered Learning*. Edutopica (blog), September 2015. Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.

¹⁷ Ibid.

- Do my students have balanced and equitable opportunities to show me what they know?
- What information about students, other than skills and content knowledge, can I gain from my assessments?
- What shifts in my classroom would enable me to have assessment be more authentic?
- How can I ensure that students can apply what they have learned in context—and reflect on their learning in ways that can help them continue to apply their learning?
- How can I create assessment systems that support a growth mindset?
- [If applicable] How can I create assessments for learning that work in my school/district that also requires more “traditional” high stakes assessments?

Student-Centered Practices Aligned with This Principle

- Reflection Opportunities
- Frequent, Varied Assessments
- Performance Assessments

PRACTICE

Reflection Opportunities

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE

In a student-centered classroom, students have a voice; that is, the opportunity to express their thinking and perspective. One way to give students a voice during their learning journey is through reflection.

Student reflection allows students to take the time to think about their learning experience. Student reflection can take a lot of different forms depending on the student's age, the content, or the classroom. It can occur before learning, during learning, after learning, or thinking about future learning.¹⁸ There are many different types of questions that we can ask students, including those about their comfort in class, feelings about content, understanding of material, level of engagement, areas of strength, areas to focus on, and goals for the future. Reflection is significant because, “it allows students to see the importance of their own learning process.”¹⁸ As students reflect and are asked to deeply consider themselves as learners, they are becoming more involved in their own learning.

Giving students the opportunity to reflect is essential to Student-Centered Learning as “Reflection prompts students to focus on self-discovery.”¹⁸ We assess students in many different ways, but we don’t always ask students to assess themselves. As we guide students through the reflection process, we teach them how to think about themselves as learners which enables them to become active participants in their learning. Reflections help us “validate, expand, and enrich our learning about the production of work.”¹⁹ By giving students the space and opportunity to reflect in the classroom, we help them develop their voices and foster self-discovery, both of which support their long-term growth. Moreover, by having students reflect throughout different points on their learning journey, they are able to learn more about themselves while allowing the teachers to better know the students and thereby make decisions about where to facilitate continued learning.

Reflection Opportunities can look like surveys, oral debriefs, self-assessments, chalk talks, journaling, and any number of other formats. Some of these provide teachers valuable data, while others are focused entirely on the students themselves. While the data can be invaluable, what is most important is that students can become the managers of their own long-term growth by building their reflective muscles through regular exercise.

¹⁸ Alrubail, Rusul. *Scaffolding Student Reflections + Sample Questions*. Edutopia (blog), January 2015. Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.

¹⁹ Kallick, Bena and Zmuda, Allison. *Students at the Center: Personalized Learning with Habits of Mind*. ASCD Publishing, January 2017.

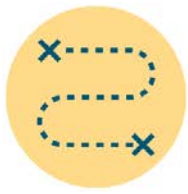
Key Considerations for Implementation in the Classroom

- How can reflection balance variation with repetition, so that students can form reflective habits while also remaining engaged and authentic in the process?
- What are our priority goals for reflection in a given unit or at a given point in time, and what forms of student reflection best align with these goals?

Teacher Spotlight & Exemplar Tool

- “Leveraging Google Forms to Get Information and Feedback from Students” by Jara Richards

REFLECTION OPPORTUNITIES TOOL



Leveraging Google Forms to Get Information and Feedback from Students

by Jara Richards

TOOL DESCRIPTION

An exemplar Google form used for reflection at the end of a math unit, which educators can use as inspiration for their own, as well as guidance (below) for effective student reflection.

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

This form was developed to guide reflection at the end of Unit 2 of sixth grade math

TOOL & LINKS

- [Exemplar Google form](#) (please do not complete the form; it can be used as a model for teachers to create their own)

About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

When thinking about incorporating student reflection into the classroom, it's important to think about what information you want to learn from your students. There are many different categories in which valuable data and information can be collected! Depending on what you want to learn from your student, you can ask different types of questions. Categories to consider include:

• Student reflection on academic topics

- Give students an opportunity to reflect on strengths and areas of difficulty connected to specific content and learning targets.
- Students can name how they are understanding the topics that are being taught.
- Give students a chance to ask questions or list areas that they want extra practice or assistance.
- Have students reflect on their progress towards standards/units.

• Student reflection on specific lessons

- Allow students the chance to explain if they thought that class was engaging.
- Give students a chance to share their thoughts about lessons.

• Student reflection on activities

- Give students a chance to share what types of activities they enjoy in the classroom.

- Allow students to name which type of activities are most engaging to them.

- **Student reflection on my teaching**

- Have students give feedback on what they like in my class and what can be improved.
- Allow students to give suggestions about what they want to see in math class.

- **Student reflection on habits**

- How are students' habits of learning? Examples: Engagement, work completion, participation, study habits.
- How are students' doing with any guiding principles of the school? Example at my school: students reflect on how respectful, responsible, safe, kind, and inclusive they are.

- **Student goal setting**

- Ask students in which areas they have grown throughout the unit/year.
- Have students set goals for the next unit.
- Have students reflect on progress towards goals.

The linked [Google Survey](#) is an example of one way to gather student reflections, but there are many traditional and innovative ways to spark and capture student reflections.

There are then many things you (as teacher) can do once you have students reflect. Go through the responses Google Sheet, and:

- Take notes, color coordinate responses, find common themes.
- Have individual check ins with students to discuss reflections.
- Check in with small groups of students if there are similar responses.
- Check in with the class and talk about overall themes.
- Reflect yourself about how you can use the student reflections to adapt your teaching.

Teacher Narrative

One of my top goals as a teacher is to truly engage my students in their math learning. I want students *to grow in their understanding of math while being active sense makers who can be aware of their learning journey*. I am constantly self-reflecting about my lesson creation and teaching to see if I am meeting my goal for my students. After a lesson, there are many thoughts that go through my head. "Did that lesson go well?" "Did everyone understand the concept being taught?" "Were there any misconceptions that weren't clarified?" "Did the students engage and participate the way that I wanted?" "Did they enjoy the lesson?" While I can think I have the answers to all of the questions, the problem is that you never really know until you ask the students themselves!

Of course, informal check-ins are always great and taking a few minutes to check in can be helpful, but I wanted to go deeper to hear from all of my students. I decided to find a way to hear from all the students in my class. In

order for my classroom to be more student-centered, *I decided to give my students more of a voice in sharing their thoughts and feelings about class through reflection.*

I have prioritized giving students the opportunity to reflect via Google Forms at least once a unit. I explain to the students that I truly appreciate hearing from them, and I think that it is important to know that their thoughts and feelings are important to me as the teacher. I ask different questions in different surveys depending on what information I want to get from the class. Questions can be about student learning, understanding of learning targets, progress towards a goal, how they felt about class, their engagement in a lesson, areas of strength and areas to grow, or goals for the future. By asking them to reflect, they are more thoughtful about where they are at in their learning journey. In addition, I am able to make decisions in my class based on the students' voices. All of this helped me work towards a more student-centered class where I was listening to student voices and making decisions based on their responses.

I have found such value in having students reflect in my classroom. I have found that many students are more willing to share their thoughts and feelings when writing on paper and appreciate having the time to get their thoughts down. Compared to other years, when I just informally checked in with students, I was able to see their thoughts and then check back and ask them specific questions.

- **Example 1:** I started a new practice of doing work in small groups at vertical whiteboards and in the first reflection of the year, when given the opportunity to choose their favorite type of math lesson, 70% named whiteboard tasks in their response. This allowed me to see that they were enjoying the whiteboards and made me confident in continuing to use them in class.
- **Example 2:** One student expressed that they wished that the class was moving at a quicker pace. After reflecting, I was able to check in with the student and talk about opportunities to work above grade level and offer challenge work.

The follow up conversations that can come from these Google Form check-ins can be so powerful. I view the responses as a spreadsheet and go through each response. I highlight different responses and decide if I want to have a whole group, small group, or individual conversations with students. At times, I change or adapt lessons or classes based on student reflections.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Jara Richards is currently in her ninth year of teaching. She teaches 6th grade math for Boston Public Schools at Eliot K-8 Innovation School, where she uses reflection in her classroom. One of her top goals is to “truly engage students in their math learning.”



PRACTICE

Frequent, Varied Assessment

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE

Most teachers are familiar with the concept of formative assessment, or the “planned, ongoing process” in which teachers “elicit and use evidence of student learning to improve student understandings” and “support students to become self-directed learners.”²⁰ To make this practice student-centered, it is important that these assessments be both frequent and varied.

Incorporating *Frequent, Varied Assessments* in the classroom means utilizing an array of formative assessment strategies that can be deployed quickly to evaluate the understanding of individual students and/or the whole class. These assessments are critical opportunities for data collection, teaching adjustments, and feedback for students. According to Dylan Wiliam, effective formative assessments produce evidence of student achievement that is “used by teachers, learners, or their peers to make decisions about next steps in instruction” to improve learning outcomes.²¹

Teachers should ideally administer a formative assessment each time a new skill, process, or concept is learned.²² This frequency of assessment provides valuable feedback for everyone in the classroom, and student and teacher adjustments can be formulated swiftly to prepare students for summative assessments (final evaluations). For example, entry and exit slips can consist of short-answer or multiple choice questions and teachers can sort them into piles based on levels of mastery, self-assessment prompts that ask students about their confidence with the content or areas of confusion, or “misconception checks”²³ that direct students to correct errors in their sample work.²⁴

Historically, teachers have relied on traditional end-of-term tests and papers as the single methods of assessment. However, varied and multimodal assessment is more equitable and student-centered because it affords students a variety of opportunities to demonstrate their proficiency, in different formats, throughout the course of their learning. This provides a fuller picture of their competencies and gives students a range of data about themselves as learners, rather than privileging a narrow set of skills by assessing them in one way. A variety of assessment styles such as visual representations, peer-edit opportunities, and discussion-based assessments (many of which are Performance Assessments) can allow

²⁰ The Formative Assessment for Students and Teachers (FAST) State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards (SCASS). *Revising the Definition of Formative Assessment*. Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers, 2018. Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.

²¹ Wiliam, Dylan. *Embedded Formative Assessment*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press, 2011.

²² Alber, Rebecca. *Why Formative Assessments Matter*. Edutopia (blog), February 2011, updated January 2014. Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.

²³ From [Misconception Check](#) on the Rochester Community Schools: Think! From the Middle online collection/website.

²⁴ Thomas, Laura. *7 Smart, Fast Ways to Do Formative Assessment*. Edutopia (blog), April 2019. Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.

a variety of methods for students to express their understanding. Assessments such as these can serve both teachers and students in planning next steps for learning.

Frequent, Varied Assessments are essential to Student-Centered Learning because they “make students’ thinking visible”²⁵ in an ongoing, dynamic format. While frequent assessments are essential feedback for teachers, they also give students many chances to reach proficiency and to improve their work. Perhaps even more importantly, frequent assessments train students to become lifelong learners who react and adjust to feedback without explicit instruction from the teacher. The [IRIS Center](#) states that formative assessments help students to build metacognitive skills to “develop the ‘habits of mind’ that will allow them to consistently assess and improve their own learning processes and progress, as opposed to always relying on others to assess them.”²⁶ Thus, Frequent, Varied Assessments are crucial for revealing both to the teacher and student what the student knows so that they can adjust and evolve their teaching and learning.

Key Considerations for Implementation in the Classroom

1. What is the **core understanding** with which students should walk away from this lesson, and how can I assess that understanding quickly and in an ongoing/continuous manner?
2. With data from formative assessments, how will I **adjust my instruction** to move every learner forward? (What will I do once I have the data?)
3. How can I create opportunities for students to **plan next steps** based on their formative assessment feedback?
4. What assessment methods can I add to my short-list so that I have a toolkit of a **variety of assessment modalities**?

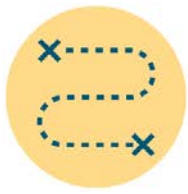
Teacher Spotlights & Exemplar Tools

- “Leveraging Verbal Processing through ‘Speed Dating’” by Lindsey Combs
- “Habitat Research Project: Varied Assessments to Demonstrate Mastery” by Jen Hines

²⁵ From [Assessment-Centered Learning Environments](#), part of a set of online resources issued online by the Iris Center at Vanderbilt University.

²⁶ Ibid.

FREQUENT, VARIED ASSESSMENTS TOOL



Leveraging Verbal Processing through 'Speed Dating'

by Lindsey Combs

TOOL DESCRIPTION

A “speed dating” activity to use at the beginning of a unit, to leverage students’ oral and social skills as they create thesis statements to clarify their main arguments (theses).

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

This activity was developed for a Sociology of Gender class of about 20-25 juniors and seniors at a small charter school in Cambridge. The course follows a project-based learning model in which students are asked to apply gender and sociology concepts to social issues in their own communities.

TOOL & LINKS

- [Speed Dating Protocol](#) (slide deck)—Additional guidance below

About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

Process & Materials

This “speed-dating” activity requires the following materials:

- a graphic organizer of prompts so students can prepare for the discussion,
- a set of question sentence-stems as a resource for the listening student,
- a timer, and
- a real or [virtual bell](#) (optional).

PREPARE FOR YOUR THESIS SPEED-DATES!

NAME: _____

Prompt: To what extent does PHA contribute to the school-to-confinement pathway, and what should leaders of the school change to further disrupt it?

Write down your thesis:

If you don't have your thesis yet, answer the below questions:

1. What does our school do that perpetuates racism and sexism? That harms Black girls?
2. What does our school do to work against racism and sexism? To put students affected by racism and sexism on a good path?
3. What should change about our school to further disrupt racism and sexism?

Optional: What is a dilemma you have or something you are unsure about for this assignment?

To begin, students are given [a prompt or series of prompts that are relevant to the current project \(mine is linked\)](#). They spend a few minutes jotting down the key points they want to share in the speed dating activity. Then, they stand in two lines facing each other for "speed-dating." Each student faces one other student, and they take turns presenting their answers to each other.




THESIS SPEED-DATING!!!

**GOALS: Refine our thinking about our theses
Push each other to think deeper
Learn about other students' arguments.**

We will stand in two lines, with each student facing another.

1. Student A will share their thesis/what they have so far.
2. Student B will respond with a question, comment, or feedback (see the back of your speed-dating prep sheet for ideas)
3. Start over and switch roles

When you hear the bell, rotate down one person!
REFINE YOUR IDEAS EACH TIME YOU SHARE!
→ more concise, more convincing





Students stand in 2 lines facing each other, and "speed-date" with the person across from them.

The *listening* student actively listens and has in front of them a set of question sentence frames that prompt them to seek clarification, to get their partner to answer all parts of the prompt, to share feedback, and to ask probing questions (see linked tool). The goal is to create a conversation, rather than to simply present one's work. After around 3-5 minutes, I ring a bell, and students shift over to their next partner to repeat the

process but to share further-refined ideas. They repeat this process around 3-5 times, and end the activity by writing down their final argument(s), which they submit for my feedback.

Additional Guidance

The success of this activity hinges upon:

- Students' understanding of its purpose (e.g. refining and solidifying your thesis and helping each other to develop your ideas).
- Having differentiated prompts so that every student can have something to say. If the prompt is simply, "what is your thesis?" students who do not have one may disengage with the activity and become agents of distraction. Include scaffolded prompts so that every student can access the activity.
- Having sentence frames for the listening student so that they share feedback and questions that align with the project and rubric. Otherwise, the extent of their discussion may be, "Cool. I agree with what you said," or worse—an awkward silence.

To modify this activity for younger students, you might consider rebranding it to be more age-appropriate; for example, calling it "partner processing," "discussion chain," "share and shift," "speed share," or another nifty name.

Adaptation: This activity can be adapted for other subjects. It is best suited to activities in which students can share unique or original thinking, or there are a variety of approaches they can take; it is not well-suited to an activity where there is one correct answer that you are hoping all students will arrive at. Below are several ideas.

- Math: When posed with a complex, real-world math question or project, students can discuss the approach they want to take to solve the problem.
- Science: Students can share their plans for an original experiment they are designing.
- History: Students can share and debate their opinions on a historical question before writing an argumentative essay.
- Art, music, or theater: Students share an artistic technique that they plan to apply in an upcoming project to receive feedback and refine their ideas.

For student buy-in, it may be helpful to preempt the activity with a discussion on the value of active listening and to include some humor. With my juniors and seniors, I play a short clip, "[Dating 101](#)" that shares the importance of active listening on a first date. This creates a light-hearted tone to the activity and always gets some awkward laughs. You can also build in icebreaker questions to the activity, such as introducing yourself and sharing a hobby at the start of the speed-date, and thanking your partner for a good "first date."

Some practical tips for the activity are to:

- Spread out the line of speed-dating students as much as possible in the room so that each partner isn't shoulder to shoulder with the other. It can get quite hard to hear your partner if you are all too close. Even better—you can take the activity into a long hallway outside of the room.
- Have a large timer on the board and a loud bell or [online buzzer](#) to signal when it is time to shift partners.
- If there is an odd number of students, you should join the speed dating line; otherwise you can hover and circulate.
- Try your best to mix students by skill level when setting up the two speed-dating lines.

Teacher Narrative

I teach a Sociology of Gender class of about 20-25 juniors and seniors at a small charter school in Cambridge. The course follows a project-based learning model in which students are asked to apply gender and sociology concepts to social issues in their own communities. For this unit, we have studied the criminalization of Black girls in K-12 education, and students have been tasked with writing advocacy letters to our school leadership about how our school can better disrupt the school-to-confinement pathway. Because our school is a self-proclaimed anti-racist and restorative school and has predominantly Black and Latinx students, the project is both authentic for students and welcomed by school leadership.

I use this activity near the beginning of projects or essays to help students clarify their own main arguments. I developed it after noticing how challenging it was for many students to narrow down their many ideas into a concise thesis, let alone get over the mental hump to getting started on a daunting major writing project. The idea began percolating when I realized how helpful it was for students to talk out all of their ideas with me in order to solidify a thesis at the start of a major writing assignment. I thought to myself: how can I get students to verbally process their ideas with each other—rather than me—so that everyone receives feedback to quickly refine their ideas? That was when "speed dating" was born.

Here is a sample of a student's work from my class, before and after the speed-dating.

Thesis before the speed-dating	Thesis after the speed-dating
"While PHA is a restorative school so it has no exclusionary policies in order to disrupt the school to confinement pathway, they also contribute by lacking teachers of color in the school"	"While PHA disrupts the school to confinement pathway through its restorative discipline practices, the problem at hand is that it's heavily lacking in teacher diversity, which indirectly contributes to the school to confinement pathway."

As you can see, this student clarified her ideas through the speed-dating activity. Not only is her writing more grammatically correct and easier to read, but it has a more natural flow. I believe that processing her ideas verbally facilitated this improvement.

Having delved into the specifics of this activity, let's zoom out to the big picture of this practice. The purposes of the activity are for students to verbally process and refine their thinking with a partner, to receive rubric-aligned feedback, and to have multiple opportunities to develop and revise their ideas in a low-stakes and interactive setting. It exemplifies the practice of "Frequent and Varied Assessment" because:

1. It can be deployed quickly and used frequently.
2. It is an example of a verbal assessment that subverts traditional, written assessment models by using a different modality. This allows students to process and show their understanding verbally.
3. It gives students multiple opportunities to get feedback and refine their own ideas.
4. It offers teachers a quick way to gather qualitative data and intervene to support students who are stuck or off-base.

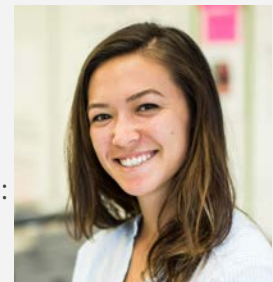
Speed-dating benefits students at whatever phase of the learning process they are in, because they share what they have so far and receive questions and feedback to push their thinking further. I've found that perhaps the most valuable aspect of this assignment is that it acts as an accessible stepping stone for students who are stuck and don't know how to begin a project; they not only get multiple chances to process their ideas verbally, but they also get to hear and gather ideas from multiple other students who are further along in their thinking, and who can take on leadership roles through helping their peers.

This practice not only contributes to building a supportive and scholarly classroom community, but it also breaks up the writing process which can sometimes be dreary, challenging, and isolating. This protocol creates a loud, buzzing, and energetic classroom environment to liven up the learning.

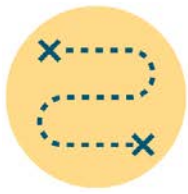
This protocol is a useful assessment tool for students to self-assess, revise, and assess each other's learning in a verbal modality. It also produces useful feedback for the teacher: listening in on and/or participating in the speed dating as the teacher can reveal illuminating information about where students are getting it and not getting it, what may need a re-teach, and who would benefit from 1-1 support. It is a powerful tool to keep in your back pocket to help increase the frequency and variety of your formative assessments and feedback cycles.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Lindsey K. Combs is a high school humanities teacher at Prospect Hill Academy Charter School, where she teaches World History and Sociology of Gender. Her approach to Student-Centered Learning focuses on student buy-in and ownership: through authentic social justice projects and frequent opportunities for reflection and revision, students become drivers of their own learning journeys.



FREQUENT, VARIED ASSESSMENTS TOOL



Habitat Research Project: Varied Assessments to Demonstrate Mastery

By Jen Hines

TOOL DESCRIPTION

The tool is a research project unit that employs varied assessments.

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

This unit was used with a second grade classroom at a suburban elementary school.

TOOL & LINKS

- [Habitat Research Project Introductory Slide Deck](#)
- [Habitat Research Project Rubric](#)
- [Student Work Examples](#)

About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

The goal of the Habitat Research Project (see links above) is to offer students a variety of assessment options to demonstrate their learning from the ecosystems and evolution science unit—and to show an understanding of the grade two life science standards. While the expectation is that all students show an understanding of the related standards, the Habitat Research Project provides students with the power to choose how they would like to be assessed. Student assessment options include (but are not limited to) creating a poster, constructing a diorama, writing a traditional report or book, making a video, designing a brochure, or composing a song, poem, or rap. By offering a variety of assessments to measure progress made towards mastering the same standards, teachers can honor the various learning styles within their classrooms.

This is a concept that could be adapted for a wide variety of curriculum areas and grade levels. It can be used frequently in a classroom to measure skills and standards across content areas.

By starting with the end goal—what is the standard or skill that is being measured or assessed—the assessment becomes more about what has been mastered and less about the modality in which mastery is shown.

The number and/or type of assessment choices can be limited depending on the grade and skill level.

Teacher Narrative

The idea of offering a variety of assessment options is an important philosophy in my classroom, because I know that not all students develop and express their learning in the same way. While there are certain non-negotiable activities and assessments that are used schoolwide, factoring in student choice and offering varied assessments allows me to act on this educational belief.

Several years ago, I found myself wondering, if it is a widely accepted fact that not every student learns in the same way, why do we so often assess students' knowledge in just one way? How would I score if my knowledge was to be measured in a way that I am not proficient, such as through art or music? If the goal is to determine whether or not a student has mastered a standard, must we use one traditional assessment? Could we offer varied assessments for the same standard? Could we find ways to allow assessments and student choice to intersect? With these questions, the Habitat Research Project was created.

The Habitat Research Project allows students the opportunity to not only choose which habitat they would like to research but also choose the modality in which they would like to be assessed. This approach to varied assessments helps guide my instruction, as I am able to better understand my students as learners and more accurately determine knowledge of the skills and standards being assessed. This project also allows my students to demonstrate their mastery in a way in which they feel confident, giving them the opportunity to discover more about their own personal learning styles. The outcome is remarkable; although students created different products, all projects were unified in one important way: each project assessed the same learning outcomes.

In this specific example, grade two life science standards were being measured. Students were able to complete a variety of assessments to demonstrate their mastery of the same concepts. However, the concept behind the Habitat Research Project could be used across content areas. For example, students could show their understanding of the elements of a fiction text by writing a story, producing a play, or making a video, as opposed to assessing all students in one way, such as a "response to reading" question. By working backwards and starting with the end goal of what standard or skill is being assessed, teachers can offer their students varied assessment opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge. Additionally, by using this approach across content areas and to address multiple standards, teachers are frequently assessing their students' growth and abilities.

At the end of the Habitat Research Project, each student has researched a self-selected habitat and created a project to demonstrate all that they have learned. While each project should meet the same provided criteria, the ability to choose their own assessment modality empowers students and gives them more ownership not only over this project, but over their learning as well.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Jen Hines is a second grade teacher at Elmwood School in Hopkinton, MA. She believes in incorporating Student-Centered Learning into the classroom to encourage students to have authentic learning experiences, share in decision-making, and take ownership over their own learning. This includes opportunities for student choice, a variety of assessments to demonstrate mastery, and the connection between the curriculum and real world topics.



PRACTICE

Performance Assessments

Important note: Performance Assessments is a complex **Core Practice** that blends aspects of Assessment for Learning and Authentic Experiences, as well as other principles. The complexity of Performance Assessments is such that this chapter can only touch the surface of the practice. We recommend that teachers new to developing and implementing Performance Assessments consider exploring them in more depth and/or engage with targeted professional development, perhaps with the aid of some of the resources provided at the end of this chapter.

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE

Performance Assessments are designed to measure what students are able to do in relationship to content standards, rather than merely what they can *recall*.²⁷ Through the creation of a product, as compared to the completion of a traditional standardized test, Performance Assessments reveal a student's depth of understanding, measure and record growth, and offer opportunities for not only student reflection, but also reflection from educators.

In Setting the **Standard for Project Based Learning**, the authors write, “We believe that students—actually, anyone—learn more efficiently, more quickly, and more deeply if they understand why they are learning and perceive their learning as purposeful.”²⁸ Performance Assessments are rooted in real-world applications of the skills students are learning in school. They can range from on-demand performance tasks that take one class meeting to complete, to curriculum-embedded project-based-learning experiences that combine multiple opportunities for formative assessment and subsequent revision of a product. In addition to assessing for mastery of academic content, Performance Assessments empower students to be 21st-century and lifelong learners by strengthening time management skills, facilitating teamwork, and encouraging creative problem-solving.

Performance Assessments are an essential component of Student-Centered Learning because they push educators and students to think beyond the walls of their classrooms. Performance Assessments cover content and reinforce academic skills, but it is the potential for student agency, independent pursuit of personalized interests, and modifications for individualized learning that make them a core practice in student-centered education.

²⁷ Assessment Learning Network. *Performance Assessment: What Is It and Why Is It Useful?* Michigan Assessment Consortium (online), September 2017. Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.

²⁸ Larmer, John, et al. *Setting the Standard for Project Based Learning: A Proven Approach to Rigorous Classroom Instruction*. ASCD Publishing, 2015.

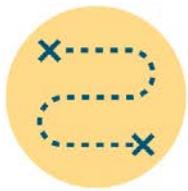
Key Considerations for Implementation in the Classroom

- How do you currently communicate the why and the purpose of learning to your students?
- Where in your existing curriculum are there opportunities to extend an existing lesson or unit to include a performance task Are there ways to re-think assignments, assessments, and resources to prioritize application rather than recall?
- Taking into consideration the developmental level of your students and the discipline you teach, in what ways will your students be able to show their knowledge (a presentation, a performance, a piece of artwork, etc.), and which model will get them most excited to show what they know?

Teacher Spotlights & Exemplar Tools

- “Text on Trial: Mock Trial Performance Assessment” by Margaret Hersey
- “The *Time Capsule Project*: An Opportunity for Connection and Understanding” by Jessica Zwillinger

PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS TOOL



Text on Trial: A Mock Trial Performance Assessment

By Margaret Hersey

TOOL DESCRIPTION

This unit plan is for a performance-assessment-based unit and can provide an exemplar of a contextualized Performance Assessment and of Assessment for Learning.

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

These materials were developed for highly diverse ninth grade English classes at a small, selective admissions-based public urban high school. The teacher implemented this performance task in the latter half of the school year, when “community norms, trust, and learning expectations were well established.”

TOOL & LINKS

- [To Kill a Mockingbird on Trial—Performance Assessment Unit Plans](#)

About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

Please see the [unit plan](#), which describes the Performance Assessment in detail.

How it worked: During the unit, we studied excerpts from the text, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as well as an array of articles, interviews, statistics, and other media. We considered the authorship of the text in connection to race, class and gender and compared it to other multicultural young adult texts we’d read earlier in the year. At the end of the unit, we held a mock trial that was entirely designed by students. They selected teams for all parts of the trial proceedings and even dressed up for their days in “court.” This model utilized students’ prior knowledge of courtroom proceedings as a safe foundation for the critical examination that can feel off-limits in the academic context.

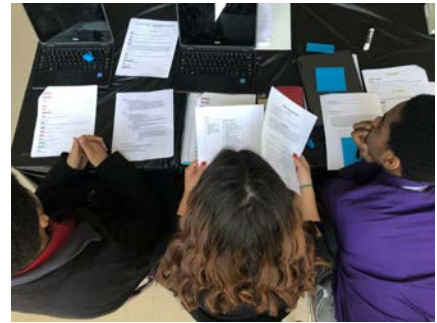


Assessing the unit: Students all did the same preparation documents, but when it came to trial day, they played different roles, meaning assessing their performance equitably would have been tricky. Because of this, and because I believe self reflection and metacognition are important, I asked students to score themselves on their performance after the jury gave their verdict. Finally, I asked students to write open letters to communicate their individual beliefs about the content and scored this myself. Their grade for this

unit consisted of formative check-ins (quote analysis, low stakes writing tasks, research check-points) as well as their trial self-assessment and open letter. This gave me a balanced body of student work to gauge their learning.

Guidance and Suggestions

- Talk to your students—A performance assessment like this can feel daunting to kids, especially if this type of project is outside the norm for them. There will be times throughout the process when energy starts to wane. At those points, it's critical that you have open and honest conversations with your classes about the support they need in order to persevere and be prepared for success in the mock trial.
- Pick a good question—No matter who or what you decide to put on trial, you need a good question to ground the study. I suggest having a general idea of what you'd like the central question to be, and then developing the specifics with students. If they have strong feelings about a question other than the one you designed, I suggest going with the high-interest one.
- Be transparent from the beginning—Communicate the goal of the mock trial performance assessment from the very first day of the unit. Make it clear what real-world skills and understanding students stand to gain through investment in this learning process.
- Get costumes!—Take whatever steps you can to mark the mock trial as a special day and share those things with the students in advance so they know what they're working towards. Work with your students, families, and school community to gather materials that will help you turn your space into a courtroom. We got a gavel, judge robes, some cheap wigs and gently used professional clothing. Students also set up a (very rudimentary) courtroom in a large empty classroom using plastic tablecloths and unused classroom furniture from the custodial staff.



Teacher Narrative

As many English teachers can attest, text selection is one of the most critical decisions we make in our curriculum and instructional design. The stories that we give space to in our classrooms, and the questions we ask students about these stories, send messages about what we value, and what narratives we believe are worthy of time, study, examination. In order to create relevant Student-Centered Learning experiences, we need to constantly evaluate our syllabi to reflect changes in our student body and the times we are living in. (Unfortunately, this also means that any teacher endeavoring to keep their text list current also has a graveyard full of deceased curricular materials they no doubt spent countless hours creating: RIP Dead Curriculum!). The Text on Trial unit is a performance-based unit that I developed after reflecting on my own syllabus through this lens.

To Kill a Mockingbird was on the reading list for my Freshman English course. Since its publication the novel has been banned by both conservatives and progressives alike for evolving and conflicting reasons. The

more I learned and read, the more I questioned its role in my classroom. The students knew I was in graduate school at the time, and were always curious about what I was learning. I shared this dilemma and they were interested, so I decided to shift and designed a unit ([inspired by this article by Ernest Morrell](#))²⁹ called “Text on Trial.” Instead of the typical literary analysis, I posed the question to students, “Does *To Kill a Mockingbird* deserve space in classrooms today?” The result was the unit described above..

In the end, I think this performance assessment accomplished three things that a traditional unit wouldn't have:

1. It allowed us to ask important questions about the impact of the literature and media we consume: Who gets to tell what story? Whose experience of the world is being centered? Whose is left in the margins? What relationship/impact does this have to the audience that consumes it?
2. It showed students that just because something is famous, or widely acclaimed, doesn't mean they have to agree with it. In that way it showed (or maybe reminded) them that they have the power and freedom to decide for themselves what they believe, even in school.
3. It gave them tools and practice in expressing what they believe in an authentic and playful way. Because there are so many roles to inhabit, the trial provided balanced opportunities for students to lean into their strengths while being part of this shared experience.

One final note: As hard as it is to “kill” curriculum, I needed to respect the results of the jury's verdict. Because the students ruled that this book did not “deserve the hype,” I struck it from my syllabus. It's not enough to create space for student voices in the classroom, you need to also listen to them. I love the mock trial model and am planning to use this performance-based method again in the future in a different context, perhaps putting a controversial character on trial, or interrogating current events, but I will never teach this unit again.

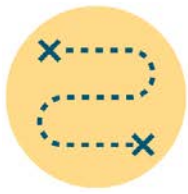
MEET THE AUTHOR

Margaret Hersey is an English Teacher and Director of Curriculum & Instruction at Springfield Honors Academy. She believes that learning should be liberatory and she is passionate about designing curriculum and classroom experiences that are creative, activating, and equitable—and center students above all else. When she's not envisioning a brighter future for our schools, Margaret enjoys gardening, running on trails with her dog and reading poetry.



²⁹ Morrell, Ernest. “Critical English Education.” *English Education*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2005, pp. 312–21. *JSTOR* (online). Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.

PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS TOOL



The Time Capsule Project: An Opportunity for Connection and Understanding

By Jessica Zwillinger

TOOL DESCRIPTION

A slide deck containing student-facing directions, examples, and contextual materials for a project / performance assessment.

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

These materials were developed for sixth grade art students at a suburban middle school.

TOOL & LINKS

- [Time Capsule Project Slide Deck](#)
- [Accompanying Word Bank](#)
- [Accompanying Sentence Starters](#)

About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

The slide deck above contains the framing, requirements, and examples of the *Time Capsule* project used in a middle school art classroom. The deck was developed to be student-facing and to guide their work through the project, along with the support from the teacher. The two additional links above (word bank and sentence starters) are scaffolds for students in need of support.

Additional notes from the teacher: The concept of a Time Capsule could be adapted to a wide range of disciplines and grade levels. Young students could have their ideas more explicitly directed; for example, “Draw your favorite part about school,” or “Draw something you use for your favorite hobby.” Older students could use an assignment like this for perspective-taking. Perhaps this assignment is adapted to illustrate depth of understanding of a character in a novel or an influential historical figure.

There could be even more choice incorporated into this assignment by offering that students create a digital piece of artwork, perhaps a collage from images sourced from the internet or using a digital drawing tool of their choice. This assessment could be adapted for students with special learning needs by perhaps curating a selection of images beforehand and offering this as a collage, as opposed to traditional drawing.

Teacher Narrative

The goal of this performance assessment, the *Time Capsule* project, is to prove to students that they can make beautiful and meaningful artwork based on everyday objects. Instead of waiting for a stroke of creativity to dawn upon them, students can look around at their world, which includes friends, school, hobbies, family, pets, etc., to find all the inspiration they need.

This assignment simultaneously highlights our similarities and our differences, rooted in the shared experience of being a member of a school community; and more broadly, an active citizen in our modern world. At the outset of this project, I share with students that I live in the same town and rely on certain technology, just like most of them. I also take the opportunity to share other personal things, like my unique family structure, that model the sense of safety and vulnerability that I am working toward in my classroom.

This performance assessment has a wonderful balance of interpersonal and academic value because of the prioritization of student voice and frequent opportunities for additional scaffolding or enrichment. The essential questions that guide our work during this unit are: *What objects and items are important to me?* and *How can I use my artwork to capture something about my life as a sixth grader?*

The *Time Capsule* project has become a staple in my classroom, and year after year, continues to provide insight into my new sixth grade students and guidance for my teaching. Students are tasked with creating a drawing that acts as a time capsule for their life in sixth grade. This assignment is a perfect opportunity to begin building personal relationships with students by seeing what's important to them and what they're interested in, particularly through their answers to an opening brainstorming assignment. In the brainstorming assignment, I ask a variety of questions ranging from favorite foods, to the most interesting things students are learning in their other class, to how long they have known their best friend, to what their family's cultural background is. I deliver this portion of the lesson through a Google Form, an advantage of which is being able to view student responses in a Google Sheet.

Next, the *Time Capsule* project allows students to devote their time and energy to learning to draw things that they feel personally connected to, rather than a more prescriptive assignment in which all student artwork comes out looking appealing but similar. This opportunity for student agency is a hallmark of Student-Centered Learning, and it undoubtedly encourages students to take ownership and feel investment, and ideally pride, in their work.

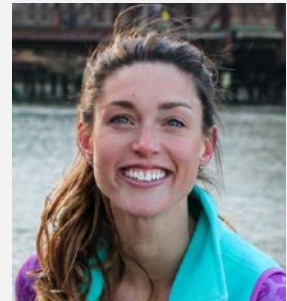
Additionally, as a teacher just starting to get to know these sixth graders as individuals and as students, I can begin to see various levels of understanding and readiness to move toward using symbolism in a student's artwork. For example, some students choose to include only literal representations of items and objects in their time capsule, whereas others are ready to represent more abstract concepts like the importance of family or future goals. Even a student's willingness to consider whether their *Time Capsule* drawing needs to look like an actual box can give a lot of insight into a student's readiness to experiment with symbolism in his or her work.

Lastly, in the reflection component of this performance assessment, which is referred to as the Artist's Statement, students are asked to explain the relevance of each item they included in their drawing. They are also asked to walk a viewer through some of their artistic choices and challenges during the process of creating their artwork. Through the Artist's Statement assignment, there is opportunity for enrichment through creative writing, but there are also scaffolds in place, like a word bank and sentence starters (both linked above), to support students who may find writing, particularly in art class, to be stressful and challenging.

The beauty and challenge of a performance assessment, like this *Time Capsule* project, is that the results cannot be perfectly predicted. Educators are empowering students to find their voice and to be active learners who make decisions and take ownership over their learning. It's humbling and exciting as a teacher to provide students with the space to show understanding through performance assessments. Whether you work with our youngest learners or our academic high-achievers preparing for higher education, or whether you work with those that love art or those that are self-conscious about their ability to express themselves visually, in using performance assessments you are validating students' lived experiences, strengths, and ideas, all of which will stay with a student far beyond the time they spend in our individual classrooms.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Jessica Zwillinger is a middle school visual arts educator who lives and works in Hopkinton, Massachusetts. Student-Centered Learning is a cornerstone of Jessica's teaching philosophy. She believes that the art room is a special place where students can show knowledge and understanding in ways that may not be offered as frequently in other disciplines. As such, Jessica prioritizes safety, inclusion, and student voice in her classroom through authentic project prompts, opportunities for choice, and meaningful in-process conversation and feedback.



SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Written Publications & Works Cited

- Alber, Rebecca. *Why Formative Assessments Matter*. Edutopia (blog), February 2011, updated January 2014. Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.
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Other Web-Based Resources

- [Assessment-Centered Learning Environments](#), part of a set of online resources issued online by the Iris Center at Vanderbilt University.

- [Building for Equity Reflection Questions](#), a tool in the Center for Collaborative Education Building for Equity guide, initially meant to be completed by members of a group of educators completing (re-)design work, but applicable for any reflective purpose in an equity-minded context.
- [Envision Schools Performance Assessment Resource Bank](#), which includes tools for searching by tag as well as for browsing.
- [Grading and Reporting for Educational Equity](#), a webpage including a printable tool focused on equitable, proficiency-based assessment, data-gathering, grading and reporting.
- [Make Formative Assessment More Student-Centered](#), a website from Common Sense Education that includes videos and related articles.
- [Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Educational Assessment \(MCIEA\)](#) website, with information about the partnership of districts and organizations pushing for a new assessment and accountability system in Massachusetts—notably including teacher-developed and -validated performance assessments.
- [Misconception Check](#) on the *Rochester Community Schools: Think! From the Middle* online collection/website, a slate of resources for middle school teachers curated by two educators at a Reuther Middle School in Rochester, MI.
- [Quality Performance Assessment website](#), [tools](#), and [blueprints](#), available for free from the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE), provide an entire system for Assessment for Learning with performance assessments as the backbone in a student-centered context. This can be used for individual tools (such as task validation) or as a comprehensive guide.
- [Student-Designed Learning Projects](#), a free web-based self-paced course from Vermont Professional Learning Network (PLN) through VT's Agency of Education, which includes videos and activities focused on developing and facilitating student-designed performance assessment.

PRINCIPLE

Authentic Experiences

Defining this Principle: Students learn when they are inspired to frame their own questions and pursue meaningful answers. The Authentic Experiences principle is where theory meets practice, inviting students to act on their learning and make real-world impact. This demands a question-centered approach in which teachers open themselves to risk and uncertainty, letting go of preconceived “right answers,” and welcoming students’ unexpected insights, answers, solutions, and new questions.³⁰

Authentic learning experiences are essential to Student-Centered Learning because students are more readily able to make the correlation between the content and their lives. Students are encouraged to take an active role in the learning process rather than being passive recipients. When students are provided opportunities to actively engage in exploration and inquiry, they are challenged to think critically about real world issues and develop solutions to address them.

More than merging real-world context into the curriculum or striving to solve real-world challenges, this principle equips students with the tools and knowledge they need to evaluate information and develop the agency to disagree or agree with information and ideas presented. Additionally, authentic learning experiences encourage students to consider multiple perspectives and foster social action—a pillar of Culturally-Responsive Teaching.

At the heart of Authentic Experiences is what Gholdy Muhammad frames as “criticality,” which she defines as the “ability to see, name, and interrogate the world not only to make sense of injustice but also to work toward social transformation.”³¹

Ultimately, Authentic Experiences:

- connect to students’ identities and lived experience,
- center real-world topics,
- create space for students to make real-world impact,
- see students not as passive recipients of received knowledge, but as agents of their own learning, and
- invite students and teachers to partner in an open-ended exploration of the complex world we share.

Essential Questions Connected with This Principle:

- How do we integrate “real world” topics into the classroom in a culturally-responsive way that avoids a teacher-driven approach?

³⁰ This draws partly on the thinking of [Eleanor Duckworth’s Critical Explorers program](#).

³¹ Muhammad, Gholdy, and Bettina L. Love. *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*. New York: Scholastic, 2020, p 120.

- How can teachers and students balance skills-based experiential learning with content-based learning requirements?
- What does it mean for us to make classroom walls “permeable” and enable learning from, within, and for our communities (and beyond!)?

Student-Centered Practices Aligned with This Principle:

- Real World Topics
- Work- and Community-Based Learning
- Culturally-Responsive Teaching³²

³² Culturally-Responsive Teaching is a complex **Core Practice** that blends aspects of Authentic Experiences and Student Agency, as well as other principles.

PRACTICE

Real World Topics

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE

Real World Topics is the practice of bringing into the classroom topics that are relevant to students, their families, their communities, and the world. Intended both to boost engagement and to support students in developing transferable skills and knowledge, Real World Topics enable students to connect their classroom to the world beyond.

Student-Centered Learning (SCL) as a whole moves students from passive receivers of information to active participants in their own discovery process. What students learn, how they learn it and how their learning is assessed are all driven by each individual student’s needs and abilities. When students take responsibility for their own learning, they become explorers capable of leveraging their curiosity to solve real-world problems. In order to provide the most authentic experience possible, it is crucial to provide students the means necessary to explore real-world topics. Students will engage in project-based learning, often related to community-based issues and real-world problems, using curriculum based on personalization, adult world connection, and common intellectual mission. Ultimately, students will learn that learning doesn’t live solely inside the classroom; they will see authentic connections between what they experience in the classroom and real-world situations.³³

Experts and pundits are divided about whether or not it is true that most of the jobs our students will have upon graduation do not yet exist ([see an argument for](#) and [one against](#) this theory). Regardless, this very ambiguity underscores the broader point that our students need to be provided with the tools and context that enable them to make decisions with as much precision as possible—and the savvy to move capably and confidently into an unknown future.

Key Considerations for Implementation in the Classroom

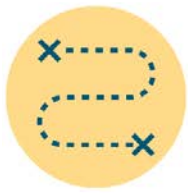
- Will this be relevant in 5, 10, 15, 20 years?
- What tangible skills are students gaining?
- How can we ensure that the “real world” students explore represents the Authentic Experiences of all students, without marginalizing those with important counter-narratives to the dominant groups in the class (and in society)?

³³ This paragraph is inspired in part by the following: Green, C. & Harrington, C. *Student-Centered Learning: In Principle and in Practice*. Lansing, MI: Michigan Virtual University, 2020. Available [at this link](#) as of 7/2022.

Teacher Spotlights & Exemplar Tools

- “Bringing Learning to Life” by Nick Tuccinardi
- “Salir del hoyo: Using Students’ Experiences to Reflect on Challenges and Overcoming Them” by Daniela Escobar

REAL WORLD TOPICS TOOL



Bringing Learning to Life

By Nick Tuccinardi

TOOL DESCRIPTION

Project-Based Learning unit and group project performance task, focused on groups of students “curating” the 2023 World’s Fair.

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

This unit was developed for high school Advanced Placement English students at a suburban high school.

TOOL & LINKS

- [Teacher's Project Plan and Rubric](#)
- [Student-Facing Rubric and Directions](#)
- [Additional Project Documents](#)

About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

This unit was developed for use with high school AP English Language and Composition students as a group project with individual components that are relevant to the real world.

Small groups work together on a project to curate the 2023 World’s Fair, receiving the following instructions:

This will be the 130th anniversary of the Columbian Exposition. Your fair will have two complementing themes: indigenous peoples and when worlds collide. Our fair will celebrate the earliest peoples worldwide, and as we reflect back and honor the past, we will also cast our eyes ahead to what our future may hold. Each individual will be responsible for turning in a proposal based on their role. Each group will be responsible for writing a 50- word proposal that includes all information outlined in the goals as well as a Slides presentation. The entire group will present the slides.

The linked materials (above) include:

- The teacher’s plans for the project-based unit, including a standards-based rubric and specific group requirements;
- A student-facing version of the above, with directions and rubric included;

- A folder containing a variety of the documents used by the teacher, such as an individual proposal form and a note-taking template.

Teacher Narrative

In my seven years in education, I have noticed a significant dichotomy amongst the students I have had year to year; the line had been blurry to me up until this year. The location of this line in time that divides the haves from the have-nots has become crystal clear. The line is 2007 and the accompanying event was the launch of the first ever iPhone. 2007 was a momentous year for other reasons as well, namely that the class of 2025 was born.

As time goes on and we educate more children who have never known a world without technology, our practices are going to need to drastically adapt to meet the changing needs of humanity. I believe that as educators we have two key challenges to combat in regards to “new” technology usage: attention/entertainment and utility.

Attention/Entertainment: Once upon a time students that were not interested in what was happening at the front of the room had few means of recourse: they could pass notes, doodle, day dream, or perhaps cause a ruckus. Today’s students can run an online business, communicate with millions of followers, or defy reality as a racecar aiming to score a metallic soccer ball in some futuristic hybrid of NASCAR and football, to name a few. Today’s students have every reason to turn away from their lessons and toward... absolutely whatever they want. They hold a world of power and entertainment in their pockets.

As Ken Robinson points out in his iconic RSA talk, “[Changing Education Paradigms](#),” the modern school system was built on an assembly line model and despite living in the most extraordinary time in human history, we are anesthetizing our students. In order to compete (and compete we must) with the marvels and pitfalls of a technology that is actively trying to pull students in, we must present a compelling alternative. As educators, we do not have a choice but to accept that on top of content facilitation and adaptation, social emotional support, and classroom management, we must also be entertaining.

As entertainers we not only need to create compelling and pragmatic lessons but we also must deliver them in a way that excites students.

Utility: As mentioned previously, the modern education system in America is fashioned off of an assembly-line factory model. This problem is further complicated upon realization that not only is this model out of date, but any new model is sure to be rapidly out paced by technology. Thus, we need to create a model—and content—that is both solid and malleable. Ultimately the goal of every class should boil down to critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, and humanity.

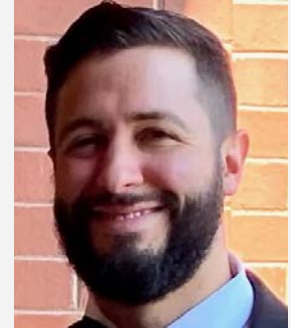
In my opinion, the skills students learn in the classroom should be a springboard for all future learning and therefore skills should take precedence over content. We must consider whether or not it is necessary to teach such educational pillars as grammar, mathematical calculations by hand, and memorizing historical

dates. Artificial intelligence (i.e. Grammarly), tools (i.e. calculator), and portable computers (i.e. iPhones) have begun to make these classic skills obsolete.

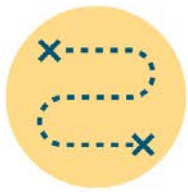
In a dynamic and shrinking world, there is nothing more important to teach our students than the ability to think critically and compassionately.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Nick Tuccinardi is a high school English teacher at Melrose High School. He believes that education is at its best when students are engaged and interested in what and how they are learning. He teaches unlevleled freshman English 1 (grade 9), a course that is in its second year of being unlevleled and has led to an unlevleling of 10th grade as well. He also teaches juniors and seniors in AP English Language and Composition.



REAL WORLD TOPICS TOOL



Salir del hoyo: Using Students' Experiences to Reflect on Challenges and Overcoming Them

By Daniela Escobar

TOOL DESCRIPTION

A unit plan for a project-based unit focused on students' authentic challenges and experiences, aimed at high school Spanish students.

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

This unit was developed for high school AP Spanish students, predominantly heritage and native Spanish-speakers, in an urban high school; and initially developed for implementation during the pandemic.

TOOL & LINKS

- [Salir del Hoyo Unit Plan](#)
- [Student Work Sample 1](#)
- [Student Work Sample 2](#)

About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

Context: This unit was designed for Heritage and Native Spanish speakers from mostly 10th and 11th grade (and some 12th graders) in the AP Spanish: Language and Culture course. Students worked intensively all year to take their exam and, in March, school was closed for the global pandemic. I wanted to create a learning experience that was built on the authentic experiences of students, on the real-world challenges they were facing during the school closure and the global pandemic and, through class work and class time, design a space for students to reflect on their immediate lived experiences, emotions, and challenges.

Provided Resources: A description of the unit and the project breakdown can be found in the [unit plan document](#). Additional documents, such as student handouts, templates, and list of resources are linked in the unit plan document.

The students' samples [linked above] illustrate the intimate and personal nature of this project. For example, in [Sample 2](#), the student wrote a poem in which they present a symbolic reflection of being a Guatemalan migrant and connect this experience to those of the indigenous communities from this country that we studied through Rigoberta Menchú. Later in the poem, they identify challenges as a building part of life, as a block that both drowns and teaches how to swim. In their reflection, the student elaborates this

idea further and presents that, for them, this project helped them become more aware of challenges being a part of life and accepting that learnings can come from painful experiences.

The final products represent that aspect of the unit: Final reflection formats should be organic to the students' reflection processes. The teacher can still design criteria for students to include in their reflection. In this case, for instance, they had to integrate the resources we had covered and include at least one peer reflection. Yet, that still leaves a lot of room for students' autonomy in creating their reflection, as seen in the two samples linked above.

Suggestions for Adaptation: While it is true that “Real World Experiences” can refer to integrating the classroom with larger entities in the community, such as stores, museums, companies, etc. it also refers to connecting the classroom to students' social-emotional situations, personal circumstances, or responding to crises or important events in students' communities. This practice is based on that value.

If you are to use this unit as a way to incorporate students emotional background into the classroom, you can consider:

- **Relevance in space and context:** This unit was designed for a Spanish class and it can be adapted to different levels, age groups, and to ELA classes. However, you can use it in other contexts by modifying the research resources. If, for instance, in a Math class, you notice students have emotional responses to solving novel problems—this framework of overcoming challenges can come in handy through the study of mathematicians who have faced those same struggles. In this case, I would not approach it as a whole, linear unit, but as a warm up or a weekly activity that allows you as the teacher to have an emotional check in with students.
- **Time:** The original unit shared here is linear and was taught for three weeks. However, this is an easy to modify unit that allows for changes in time and pace depending on the needs.
- **Outcome and general goal:** The main purpose of the unit is to “organize challenge” and help students navigate uncertainty through the understanding of theirs and other people's response to challenge. This goal is very, very broad. Feel free to modify it and adjust it to your context and your needs.

Teacher Narrative

The goal I work towards on every unit plan and lesson plan is to make sure the class, the class content and the space itself, is relevant for students, for who they are, what they carry, who they want to be. When I think of real-world topics in the classroom, I don't necessarily navigate, at least not always, to “bringing the outer world news and topic into the classroom,” but use and center the students' real lived experiences and identities as the primary material of my classes.

While this is a goal that I aspire to every time, the need for it became more tangible during the school closure of 2020. Students were struggling in their homes due to so many circumstances and they felt alone in these challenges. The hope of this project, of this unit, was to transform the (virtual) classroom into a

space where students could share, organize, and give meaning to what they were going through— to make their immediate lived experience the core for the academic work.

The structure was simple: Students reflected on a moment in their lives they had struggled and shared with other students the learnings they have had for this moment; later, students researched on people who have had overcome challenging episodes and reflected on the lessons they learned from these stories; lastly, students shared their learnings and reflections to peers through a product. On that first step, a student shared:

“A difficulty I have had is not having someone to help me with school. When I was in Elementary School, I had homework that my parents couldn't help me with because they didn't speak English [...] After some years, I realized later that I could ask teachers or peers for help and I started doing that... Just reaching out and asking for help when I needed it.”

Through brief reflections like this, students start noticing that the challenges they experienced before, which were once big and overwhelming, were resolved little by little. Challenges became less threatening through individual reflection, time, support from others, and remembering that, that challenges can become less challenging started giving some light to the students' present.

As the unit went by, students realized they could gain some control of their lived experiences through building a narrative for them, through organizing them and transforming them into words, naming them, and connecting them with the experiences from their past, from their peers, and from others in this world who have, too, lived and overcame challenge. This is how Real World Topics manifest in this unit, through developing students' social-emotional and self-reflection awareness and connecting their lives to those of others.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Daniela Escobar teaches Spanish in Excel Academy Charter High School in East Boston, MA. She teaches Novice and Intermediate Spanish this year, but had previously taught AP Spanish: Language and Culture before, and she has spent most of her career working with Spanish Heritage students.



PRACTICE

Work- and Community-Based Learning

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE

Work- and Community-Based Learning is the direct integration of knowledge, skills, and practices learned in the classroom to real-life experiences in the community and workplace. This is an integral part of Student-Centered Learning and it needs to embed the experiential learning piece as part of its practice for an authentic and practical education. Students need to have the opportunity to learn by experience, then practice those skills to become proficient. Authentic learning strategies also pair well with social-emotional learning applications. If a student can sense the emotions and feelings connecting the head to the heart, there is a growth in holistic understanding of the academic material.

Work- and Community-Based Learning practices are essential for preparing students for navigating the real world. Taking calculated risks and experiencing the world outside of ourselves supports discernment and self-assessment, both keys to personal growth. It is in experiencing the direct effects of being an informed and educated citizen that one may apply their skill sets to effect change and influence personal outcomes, and not only in themselves, but in their community at large.

According to Melaville, Berg & Blank, there is “a ‘moral imperative’ in public education to engage students actively in the community around them, to better serve in community service and in the workplace.”³⁴ Application of student knowledge through experiencing the effects of that knowledge is powerful, because it personally embeds the learning for life long application. The adage that one learns by doing is a correct observation for a successful and productive life.

If students can anchor these practiced real life skill-sets, and then apply them to real world experiences, students will more effectively and powerfully shape their future. Work- and Community-Based Learning, applied directly under the Student-Centered Learning paradigm, is an essential cornerstone to active participation in society, and being an engaged and informed participant allows for better citizenship.

Key Considerations for Implementation in the Classroom

- What story-telling strategies may I utilize to ground my students in Authentic Experiences?
- What connections does my school community have, directly or indirectly, with the working and business community that I may utilize in my curriculum?
- What resources are there for people in my community?
- What topics or units pair well with real-life learning experiences in the classroom setting?

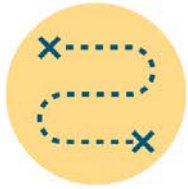
³⁴ Melaville, Atelia, Amy C. Berg, Martin J. Blank. “Community-Based Learning: Engaging Students For Success And Citizenship” Omaha, NE: University of Nebraska, Omaha, 2006. [Available online](#) as of 7/2022.

- What field trips supporting learning give my students real-life experiences?

Teacher Spotlight & Exemplar Tool

- “Building Empathy—Homelessness & The Struggle For Housing” by Lisa Brown

WORK- & COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING TOOL



Building Empathy—Homelessness & The Struggle For Housing

By Lisa Brown

TOOL DESCRIPTION

A lesson plan for a simulation that is intended to get students to think about issues people with low incomes experience when seeking housing. Students learn by role playing a person struggling with housing insecurity.

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

This unit was developed for 9th grade English Language Arts students in a regional high school and focuses on an issue of local importance.

TOOL & LINKS

- [Teacher Lesson Plan for the Simulation](#)
- [Housing Simulation Student Participant Sheets](#)³⁵

About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

Please see the [Teacher Lesson Plan](#) document linked above for detailed guidance related to this activity. Below are specific pieces of guidance gleaned from experience.

1. Depending on your curriculum objectives, tailor the discussion questions to reflect in part, next steps (e.g., What do I want to do next? Do I know of organizations that help with homelessness and housing in my town? Have I seen or read news articles that discuss these issues? What organizations that address various aspects of homelessness and housing insecurity may I help? How may I best educate others around these issues? Where is Habitat for Humanity building in my area, and can I help?)
2. The simulation is set up in a way that makes it very difficult for most participants to find housing, as it would be in real-life situations. Follow-up questions may bring up issues of inequity and racial disparity in housing, including implicit biases and cultural prejudices that may exist in your specific area. Be prepared to explore options in the discussion section of this exercise about how to address and impact these disparities.

³⁵ The original idea for this Housing Simulation came from [Habitat for Humanity](#), though it was significantly modified by the teacher. The original Habitat for Humanity version may be accessed online at <https://www.habitat.org/sites/default/files/pdf/act-speak-build-week-housing-simulation-guide.pdf> as of July 2022.

3. It is important to create a space for the simulation that has enough room for six stations and enough open space so that students may freely move about the room and wait in lines at their respective housing representation sign-ups. It is also necessary that students read their “character roleplay” so they may fully understand who they are representing in the quest for shelter.
4. Each “day” seeking housing lasts a prescribed time period during which time students are to fill out forms, talk to various housing representatives and do their best to find shelter for the night. Depending on time, the “days” may be five, ten or fifteen minutes in length. Students should experience at least four days and up to seven days of the process.
5. Depending on the length of your classes, I recommend that you run the simulation in the first class, then lead the discussion break out groups and the next steps in the second class.

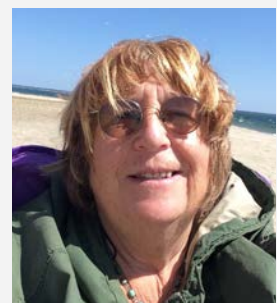
Teacher Narrative

Homelessness and housing insecurity are relevant social issues of our time, and this insecurity affects not only the world but our area in particular. Our populations on the Cape exponentially increase in the summertime, and with it come socio-economic challenges that affect transient workers as well as year-round housing. Using a housing simulation exercise builds on authentic experience. The lesson may be applied to any geographic area, as it represents the struggle with housing for groups of people nationwide. It is easy to access statistics on housing and homelessness and have the discussion be clinical and academic; it is another to simulate the *experience of housing insecurity, frustration, and anxiety* that comes with the condition of seeking shelter and finding housing. Experiencing the lines, the paperwork, and the (semi-scripted) conversations that student role players have with the representative housing authority stations is a powerful and authentic lesson in humility, compassion and empathy, and an insight into simulating the process of finding housing, based on actual programs and demographics.

Empathy is a key component to understanding how others live and an invitation to witness struggles and triumphs. It is also a building block to self knowledge and a way to empower students to feel connected to the world around them through shared understanding of experience. Authentic Experiences through community-based learning are reflected through the above artifact.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Lisa Brown Teaches SEL-based elective classes at Nauset Regional High School on the Outer Cape in Eastham, MA. She has developed classes called Exploring And Respecting Differences (EARD) and has led students in immersive international humanitarian trips to Haiti for 20 years. Her classes are designed around social emotional interaction and authentic engagement in relation to social justice issues and are based on interpersonal and intrapersonal skills building self-reflection and expression.



PRACTICE

Culturally-Responsive Teaching

Important note: Culturally-Responsive Teaching is a complex **Core Practice** that blends aspects of Authentic Learning and Student Agency, as well as other principles. The complexity of Culturally-Responsive Teaching (CRT) is such that this chapter can only touch the surface of the practice. We recommend that teachers new to CRT consider exploring it in more depth, perhaps with the aid of some of the resources provided at the end of this chapter.

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE

A Culturally Responsive classroom is one where the teacher is attuned to the students' identities, their stories and histories, interests, families, heritage; their tones when communicating and their ways of communication; and the ways they have been culturally socialized to understand and interpret information. Culturally-Responsive Teaching is, then, gathering the knowledge from students' cultural background and interests, and using it to build bridges to new concepts, skills, and content. Becoming aware and responding to students' cultural experiences allows students to engage easier and better with content, which leads to increased academic and social outcomes.³⁶

As part of Culturally-Responsive Teaching, teachers need to examine their individual and collective identities; analyze their ways of communicating, explaining, and learning; and to approach their own teaching practice with an awareness of who they are. This awareness allows teachers to recognize biases, similarities, and differences with the students' cultural backgrounds and modify teaching practices and craft learning opportunities to reflect the diverse ways in which students access, understand, and reflect on content.

For example, in the classroom, individualistic practices happen often, particularly related to exams or assessments. However, for some children who come from collectivist cultures, demonstrating understanding of a concept or a skill may be a collective task. This can also occur in instances where content is presented in written form and is introduced this way to students who come from cultures with a heavy impact of oral tradition. Adapting curriculum to respond to students' cultural background does not mean, in this case, that teachers do not teach students to read or to understand the value of the written word; it means that teachers should capitalize on students' prior knowledge and use it to introduce new content.

A Student-Centered Learning classroom is one in which the students' identities, interests, and experiences are at the core of the educational process. Culturally-Responsive Teaching facilitates bringing students' ways of existing, understanding, and relating to the world to the classroom and using this socio-cultural background knowledge to facilitate learning new content and skills.

³⁶ Adapted from [this primer on Culturally-Responsive Teaching](#) found at Understood.org

Culturally-Responsive Teaching opens the space for students to be their authentic selves in the classroom and see their culture, their background knowledge of the world, as an asset to the classroom. Culturally-Responsive Teaching is, in itself, founded on Authentic Experiences because it anchors learning in students' socio-cultural backgrounds and identities. It centers instruction in the lived experience of students. Through this practice, Authentic Experiences grow since students are building their learning over the socio-cultural basis that they already bring to the classroom—and expanding this through new skills and content.

Key Considerations for Implementation in the Classroom:

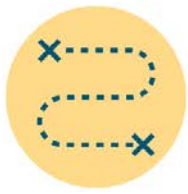
- Craft opportunities (as simple as check-ins or as complex as whole projects) that revolve around students' exploration of their identities and culture. These opportunities can vary by the degree of culture explored. In some, you can focus on the surface culture; in others, invite students to explore their shallow and deeper culture levels. Potential activities include [Power Flower](#), [Culture Iceberg](#), and [Identity Maps/Charts](#).
- Allow for opportunities to share content about students' socio-cultural history or stories.
- Survey students on their preferred ways of learning and communicating and use that information to your advantage by presenting new information through the “existing funds of knowledge”³⁷ that students already bring to your classroom.
 - When surveying students about preferred ways of learning, teachers can ask about group configuration (independent work, pair work, small groups, large groups), preferred ways of accessing information (text, audio, audiovisual), or preferred ways of demonstrating understanding, among others.
 - When surveying students about preferred ways of communicating, teachers can ask about preferred ways to receive feedback (in front of the class, 1:1, written), navigate conflict, engage in challenging conversations, among others.
- Create learning opportunities in which you analyze, question, and unpack culture bias, stereotypes, and values.

Teacher Spotlights & Exemplar Tools:

- “Teaching Sojourner Truth’s *Ain’t I a Woman* Using a Critical Literacy Framework” by Marleine Marcelin
- “Introduction to the History of Housing Segregation” by Lise Brody

³⁷ Hammond, Zaretta. *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin, 2015. P. 48.

CULTURALLY-RESPONSIVE TEACHING TOOL



Teaching Sojourner Truth's *Ain't I a Woman?* Using a Critical Literacy Framework

By Marleine Marcelin

TOOL DESCRIPTION

A set of three lessons for a unit on *Ain't I a Woman?* by Sojourner Truth, including suggested multimedia resources.

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

This unit was developed for middle school (8th grade) English Language Arts students in a diverse urban magnet school for students identified as gifted and talented.

TOOL & LINKS

- [Marleine's *Ain't I a Woman* Lesson Materials](#)
- [Ain't I a Woman](#) (speech by Sojourner Truth)
- [TED Ed video about Sojourner Truth](#)
- [Ain't I a Woman? Performance video](#)
- [Ain't I a Woman? Poem by Kai Davis](#)
- [They Say, I Say \(graphic organizer worksheet\)](#)

About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

The three lesson plans linked above and accompanying materials comprise a unit focused on Sojourner Truth's famous *Ain't I a Woman?* speech, with an emphasis on cultural responsiveness and a critical literacy lens. These lessons were created for 8th graders in a diverse urban magnet school predominantly serving Black and Latinx students who are identified as gifted; but may be adapted for other settings, as appropriate.

Guidance Per Marleine: It is important to highlight the historical context in which this piece was created. It's important to acknowledge the Woman's Suffrage Movement—especially the racial divide. However, a word of caution, don't overload students with historical context before letting them read and analyze the text. Instead, let them start reading and analyzing the text immediately.

Also, it helps to complete an example of the *They Say/I Say* graphic organizer. It not only models for students how to complete it but it also helps build connection by sharing aspects of your identity that are salient or labeled.

Teacher Narrative

According to research, there is a strong correlation between student achievement and aligned curriculum. I cannot deny how reassuring it is to use learning objectives and content that have been peer reviewed by experts in a core discipline. However, the increasing emphasis towards “standardized learning, scripted curricula, and prescriptive classroom management practices” (Schulman),³⁸ often leaves little room for creativity, flexible differentiation, and most of all authentic learning experiences.

The above lessons on the *Ain't I a Woman?* speech by Sojourner Truth are intended to be taught in three class sessions—approximately 55 minutes each. In these lessons, students read and annotate the speech, analyze literary elements and techniques, discuss themes, and lastly make text-to-self connections. One linked resource is an example of a lesson sequence that incorporates direct instruction of literary devices, group work, and individual reflection. The main objective of this lesson sequence is to connect the tenets of critical literacy—critical analysis, self-reflection, and social action—with authentic learning experiences. Rather than pitting canonical literature against contemporary pieces, I tried to maintain fidelity to the [EngageNY curriculum](#) (GRADE 8: MODULE 2A: UNIT 1: LESSON 6) while pairing the speech with a modern alternative, to offer a more compelling inclusive and relatable narrative.

It is undeniable the power that literature can have in helping us learn ourselves and others. Yet, and often selected literature in aligned curriculum can be an instrument of gatekeeping and censoring whose narratives are essential and whose perspectives are not. For this reason, infusing critical literacy into authentic learning experiences in ELA is essential to moving students from simply comprehending texts to critically analyzing those texts.

The goal of this lesson sequence is to give students another opportunity to practice analyzing an informational text. Finally, students will work towards applying what they've learned to make connections between the text and (contemporary) real world issues.

As a culturally responsive educator, I feel responsibility to apply a critical literacy approach to canonical literature. Using critical literacy is a necessary component to inspire students to challenge the intersection of power, representation, and identity. In *Authentic for Whom?* Mohammad and Behizadeh share that students—specifically of color—need personal connections to writing and literacy assignments.³⁹ Thus, since my students are primarily Black and Latinx students, I want to push them to go beyond completing the assignment for a grade and instead finding meaning, purpose, and connection between the text and themselves.

³⁸ Shulman, R.D. *This is What Happens When We Close Doors on Creativity in the Classroom*. Forbes. Available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robynshulman/2020/03/10/this-is-what-happens-when-we-close-doors-on-creativity-in-the-classroom/?sh=738649fc151e> as of July 2022.

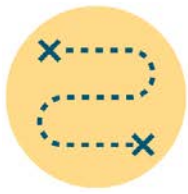
³⁹ Muhammad, G. E., & Behizadeh, N. *Authentic for Whom?: An Interview Study of Desired Writing Practices for African American Adolescent Learners*. *Middle Grades Review*, 1(2), 2015. Found online at <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/mgreview/vol1/iss2/5> as of July 2022.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Marleine Marcelin is an 8th grade ELA teacher in Springfield, MA, at a public school for gifted and talented students. In addition to being a middle school teacher, Marleine is a licensed therapist. She leverages her experiences in mental health, classroom instruction, and curriculum design to empower students to reach their full potential.



CULTURALLY-RESPONSIVE TEACHING TOOL



Introduction to the History of Housing Segregation

By Lise Brody

TOOL DESCRIPTION

An extended lesson exploring the connections among Ta-Nehisi Coates' "The Case for Reparations," systems of oppression in the United States, and students' personal experiences and assumptions.

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

This lesson was initially developed for English Language Arts students at a diverse regional charter high school and adapted for use at an urban district high school.

TOOL & LINKS

- [Activity Plan / Steps](#)
- [The House We Live In Listening and Viewing Guide](#) (to accompany [the Facing History video "The House We Live In"](#))
- [Exemplar of a Google Form-based Survey for Students and Families](#) (teachers should view and make their own similar form rather than completing/sharing this form)

About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

Linked above is a step-by-step teacher [Activity Plan](#) for this extended lesson that explores *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (a video) and includes opportunities for students to connect that video with their own personal experiences and assumptions. Teachers can also connect this activity in a broader unit exploring the text "The Case for Reparations" by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

In addition to the plans, the links above also include a listening and viewing guide and an exemplar Google Form-based survey that teachers can replicate for use in their own classroom, both of which are included in the activity plans.

Guidance per Lise

- As noted in the activity plan, it's important to keep students' personal information confidential.
- Leave space for students to draw their own connections and analysis
- Use teachable moments—interrogate students' use of the words "back then."
- Don't make assumptions about students' experiences or family backgrounds!

Teacher Narrative

Context

The California Newsreel series *Race: The Power of an Illusion's* overview of the history of redlining is one of the most clear, concrete, understandable examples of how structures perpetuate inequities. I've used it in various contexts, most recently as part of a larger unit that centered around Ta-Nehisi Coates's "The Case for Reparations."

Intent

The goal of this introductory exercise was to help students recognize that the systems of oppression described by Coates are not relics of the past but ongoing, self-perpetuating issues; and to draw connections between their lived experiences and broader social systems. More specifically, to spur them to:

- unearth historical explanations behind current housing realities.
- draw connections between the history of housing and their personal experience.
- question what they take for granted (Why do we live where we do? How is our school funded?).

Takeaways

History can feel so abstract and irrelevant to students—and racism is often something they think of as "back then." Introducing this topic via a personal connection made it meaningful to them and helped them understand that "back then" is, in fact, now.

The most inspiring evidence that students were engaging with the topic this year, was when they raised concerns about the creeping gentrification that has begun in Chelsea, a subject the video and lesson plan don't touch on. The *Do Now* questions allowed them to express their pride and love for their community, which gave them a powerful frame to talk about this current threat.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Lise Brody is a veteran educator, currently teaching ELA at Chelsea High School. Lise has taught in public, private, and charter schools, and in higher ed. Her practice is deeply informed by the 10 Common Principles of the Essential Schools movement and by Project Based Learning.



SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Written Publications & Works Cited

- Baldwin, James. *A School Rooted in Real-World Learning*. Edutopia, 2018. Available [at this link](#) as of July 2022.
- Green, C. & Harrington, C. *Student-Centered Learning: In Principle and in Practice*. Lansing, MI: Michigan Virtual University, 2020. Available [at this link](#) as of July 2022.
- Hammond, Zaretta. *Culturally Responsive Teaching & the Brain*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin, 2015
- Kleinrock, Liz. *Start Here, Start Now: A Guide to Antibias and Antiracist Work in Your School Community*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2021
- Larmer, John. *What Does It Take for a Project to be 'Authentic'?* Edutopia, 2012. Available [at this link](#) as of July 2022.
- Melaville, Atelia, Amy C. Berg, Martin J. Blank. "Community-Based Learning: Engaging Students For Success And Citizenship" Omaha, NE: University of Nebraska, Omaha, 2006. Available online [at this link](#) as of July 2022.
- Muhammad, G. E., & Behizadeh, N. *Authentic for Whom?: An Interview Study of Desired Writing Practices for African American Adolescent Learners*. Middle Grades Review, 1(2), 2015. Available online [at this link](#) as of July 2022.
- Muhammad, Ghodly, and Bettina L. Love. *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*. New York: Scholastic, 2020
- Shulman, R.D. *This is What Happens When We Close Doors on Creativity in the Classroom*. Forbes. Available online [at this link](#) as of July 2022.

Other Web-Based Resources

- [Changing Education Paradigms](#): An iconic TED Talk by Sir Ken Robinson, noted thinker and speaker on education.
- [Contextual Learning Portal, MA](#): A portal of DESE-curated resources for Massachusetts educators in schools or in out-of-school settings to support students in learning "in context" in their communities and other "real world" spaces.
- [Critical Explorers Curriculum](#): Inspired by Professor Eleanor Duckworth's work, this curriculum is one example of an "Authentic Experiences" approach.
- [Culturally-Responsive and Sustaining Pedagogy \(CRSP\) Framework](#): Developed by the Highlander Institute, this framework is a research-informed foundation for that organization's work with schools.

- [Culturally-Responsive Education Stories](#): This series of short web-based videos provides provocative educator narratives about dilemmas, successes, and learning on the topic of culturally-responsive practices.
- [Culturally-Responsive Teaching Rubric](#): This rubric, developed by a team of teachers from MA DESE, The Teacher Collaborative, and The Teacher’s Lounge, supports the assessment of culturally-responsive classroom practices.
- [Culturally-Responsive Walkthrough Tool](#): Developed by The Equity Institute, this tool supports educators in peer-observation or self-assessment settings in exploring the hallmarks of culturally-responsive instruction in their classrooms.
- [Culture Iceberg](#): An activity from the Peace Corps that explores the iceberg model of culture (found in a variety of places and originated by anthropologist Edward T. Hall).
- [DESE Civics Project Guidebook](#): An example of Authentic, Real-World Learning is the Civics Project, required of Massachusetts 8th grade and high school students, which includes student-driven research and activism about a local issue.
- [Habitat for Humanity’s Welcome Home simulation](#): The original source of inspiration for the “Building Empathy” resources developed by Lisa Brown.
- [Identity Charts](#): A resource from Facing History and found in various forms elsewhere (as Identity Maps and Circles of Identity), this activity allows students to explore aspects of their own identity and those of others’ identities.
- [Massachusetts Connecting Activities Resources](#): A curated collection of resources tailored to Massachusetts students seeking work-based learning opportunities, as well as to the educators and workplaces supporting them.
- [PBLWorks on Authenticity](#): A known expert in Project-Based Learning, PBLWorks explores the importance of ‘authenticity’ to their framework, Gold Standard PBL.
- [Power Flower Activity](#): An activity shared by the LGBTQ2S Toolkit to support culturally-responsive teaching, with a focus on exploration of the connection between the self and systems of privilege and oppression.
- [Strategies to Practice Remote Work-Based Learning Skills](#): Developed during the early pandemic, this tool from the Center for Collaborative Education provides ideas, resources, and guidelines for remote work-based learning.
- [What is Culturally-Responsive Teaching?](#): A brief primer on Culturally-Responsive Teaching by the Educator team at Understood.org

PRINCIPLE

Student Agency

Defining this Principle: Student Agency is fundamental to Student-Centered—or, perhaps even more properly—*Student-Driven* Learning. Voice, choice, and ownership are three key words that come to mind when attempting to define Student Agency. Student Agency is also known as academic choice and self-regulated learning. While there are varying definitions and terms for Student Agency, the basic premise is creating a classroom (and school) environment where students have the opportunity to take ownership and responsibility for what and how they learn. This methodological approach to classroom planning has been proved to increase the mastery of concepts and the development of life long skills such as executive functioning and reflective meta-cognition.

Student Agency applies across all Student-Centered Practices and enhances them with more deeply engaging, sustaining, and empowering aspects. One example of Student Agency applied in this way is in Project Based Learning at its best, when teachers differentiate learning by constructing choices for the students and creating a classroom culture where students can direct their own learning and feel valued to choose what and how they want to learn content while the teacher is supporting, guiding, and providing directional feedback. The construct of these choices comes in many forms. Once a student chooses an approach, they then design goals; make and take action steps; reflect on the design process; and adjust their action steps as needed.

Student Agency is the *sine qua non* that makes this—and many other practices—impactful. Project Based Learning is just one opportunity for Student Agency; other ways of creating a culture of Student Agency range from choice boards to Participatory Action Research to student-driven Civics Projects to student interest surveys, student-taught lessons, and even flexible seating choices. There are endless possibilities of ways teachers can partner with students in their own learning.

“Setting the conditions within which an environment of student agency is possible is not something that happens by accident. Student agency is culturally responsive teaching. By creating supportive environments educators and leaders can create a space where students belong, feel valued, and thereby are more likely to take risks, make mistakes, and build a sense of self-efficacy that will serve them well in their academic journeys and in their lives beyond school.”

Benjie Howard and Lindsay Prendergast⁴⁰

Creating an environment of Student Agency in a classroom builds critical thinking, problem solving, and deepens understanding of content where students develop, build, and grow in confidence, self-advocacy, perseverance, risk-taking and curiosity. Students' leadership in academic choices empowers students and engages them in their own education. Student interest and readiness has tremendous power. Students will

⁴⁰ [The Continuing Educator Podcast, Episode 3: How Culturally Responsive Teaching Enables Student Agency.](#) NWEA online.

make choices based on connections, what they like to do, their real world experiences, their culture, and their own personal curiosity.

“Readiness combined with interest leads to students doing work at a respectable complexity level with the familiarity of a topic that they relate to.”

John McCarthy⁴¹

Tasks, programs and classrooms infused with opportunities for Student Agency address diverse learning skills by meeting students where they are: their readiness, because the choices they make give them an opportunity to bring forth their strengths, expertise, and areas of interest. Ultimately, this is what we all want for our students—Student Agency opportunities that translate into students’ developing self-efficacy—a belief that they can act with agency and make an impact, in their own lives and in the world.

Essential Questions Connected with This Principle

- What does Student Agency mean to me and my classroom? Where does it already exist?
- How is Student Agency applied differently in elementary, middle and high schools?
- What prerequisite skills (if any) do students need to take ownership of their own learning?
- What are some high leverage ways to infuse more Student Agency within my classroom?
- How (if at all) can we measure Student Agency and its impact on students, immediately and long-term?

Student-Centered Practices Aligned with This Principle

- Structures for Student Leadership and Advocacy
- Personalized Pathways
- Student Voice and Choice⁴²

⁴¹ McCarthy, John. *15+ Readiness Resources or Driving Student Success*. Edutopia (blog), July 2014. Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.

⁴² Student Voice and Choice is a complex **Core Practice** that blends aspects of Authentic Learning and Student Agency, as well as other principles.

PRACTICE

Structures for Student Leadership and Advocacy

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE

Student-centered classrooms at all grade levels provide intentional structures that promote and rely upon students as leaders, and that enable students to become advocates for themselves and their beliefs within and beyond the classroom. Therefore, implementing Structures for Student Leadership and Advocacy means that the teacher recognizes and promotes opportunities for students to be active decision makers and contributors in both the classroom and the wider world.

Student leadership has long existed even within traditional school models, through “student government” structures and other elected offices. What’s different in a Student-Centered approach is the way in which all students are coaxed to become leaders, and in which more formal leadership roles are given authentic opportunities to impact the classroom and the learning. Even the youngest students are given a chance to shape the learning environment, which might appear as student-driven curriculum in a Reggio Emilia school; or as simpler approaches, like community agreements created with class consensus, or student-led conferences in lieu of the usual parent-teacher conference.

Student advocacy, too, has a role in supporting Student Agency. Contrary to traditional, teacher-driven educational approaches, Student-Centered Learning does not view student advocacy (and even activism) as out-of-place in school. In fact, many student-centered educators believe that activism is natural for young people and that, with the help of social media, children are fighting for social improvement like never before.⁴³ From The Children’s March in Birmingham in the 1960s to the No Dakota Pipeline movement in 2016, to March for Our Lives, to Black Lives Matter, students have always found ways to raise their voices for what they believe in. In student-centered classrooms, this is part of the curriculum.

The role of the teacher is to find ways to focus that energy and enthusiasm and to use it as a tool for learning and improvement. Greta Thunberg argues that young people are “in desperate need of guidance and something that tells us what the next— or sometimes the first— steps are and how we take them.”⁴⁴ When teachers help students find this path and then act as a guide and facilitator along the way, students are placed at the center, positioned to achieve agency over their learning and their lives.

There are many ways that a teacher can establish these structures in the classroom. For instance, students can complete a [20% Time project](#) that focuses on a cause, whether that be through raising awareness or fundraising or both. If a group of students wants to help with the war in Ukraine, for instance, they can collaborate to set a goal, assign student roles, fundraise, and, in doing so, provide financial assistance to

⁴³ Ramey, Heather L. and Lawford, Heather. “Why Activism Is Natural for Young People.” Greater Good, February 28, 2020. Available online as of August 2022 [at this link](#).

⁴⁴ Margolin, Jamie. *Youth to Power: Your Voice and How to Use It*. New York, NY: HACHETTE Books, 2020.

those in need and raise awareness in their community. The teacher can hit math, writing, social studies, and even art standards, while also teaching valuable lessons about how to be a contributing member of a global community.

Student activists are current and future leaders, practicing the skills needed to enact long-term change. Taking action can allow students from marginalized populations to feel represented, and it empowers them to fight injustice. This is where leadership meets advocacy. Having leadership skills can be meaningless unless you put them to good use in the world. Whether it be through raising awareness on social media, organizing a fundraiser, or starting a letter writing campaign, there are so many ways that students can put both their passions and their leadership skills to work.

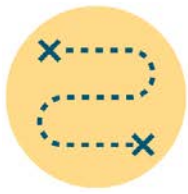
Key Considerations for Implementation in the Classroom

- What do leadership and advocacy look like at the level you teach and/or in your particular discipline?
- How could you provide individualized opportunities for students to advocate for important causes?
- How can you encourage students to use their leadership skills in a way that will benefit the broader community?

Teacher Spotlight & Exemplar Tool

- “Using Podcasts to Inform and Promote Student Leadership and Advocacy” by Courtney Henry

STRUCTURES FOR STUDENT LEADERSHIP & ADVOCACY TOOL



Using Podcasts to Inform and Promote Student Leadership and Advocacy

By Courtney Henry

TOOL DESCRIPTION

A choice-based performance assessment that engages students in advocacy.

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

This unit was developed as an end-of-year project for high school Advanced Placement English Language and Composition students at a suburban high school, in an open enrollment (rather than selective) class setting.

TOOL & LINKS

- [AP Choice Project / Presentation—Student Directions and Rubric](#)
- Suggested podcasts:
 - [Serial, Season 1 Podcast](#) (Serial Productions)
 - [The Student Podcast Challenge](#) (NPR)
 - [19 Great Learning Podcasts for the Classroom](#) (Common Sense Education)

About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

First, as a summer assignment, students listen to the first three episodes of NPR’s *Serial*, Season 1, in which Sarah Koenig explores the 1999 arrest and incarceration of Adnan Syed. He was accused of killing his ex-girlfriend, a charge he adamantly denies. Koenig explores whether or not this may be true, and, in doing so, also investigates and reveals many flaws in the criminal justice system.

What I ultimately want my students to see is that podcasts are ever-growing in popularity and provide writers with another method with which to get their ideas out into the world. Since AP Language and Composition focuses on social justice and citizenry, we continue to explore these ideas and other podcasts throughout the year.

While *Serial* works well for Advanced Placement upperclass students, there are many podcasts out there that are appropriate for younger students and that touch upon a host of topics. In fact, while *Serial* is the only podcast I use in its entirety (we end up finishing it once the school year begins), I pull episodes from other podcasts throughout the year as well, [Radiolab](#) being one example.

Then, once students are familiar with podcasts, including how and why they function, they complete research on a social issue that feels important to them. Students are encouraged to gather information and viewpoints from multiple sources, including those that challenge their own.

Finally, students are ready to create a podcast of their own. As part of a “Choice” project, they are prompted as follows:

- A. Reflect on your research.
- B. Decide on the purpose of your presentation. What do you hope to say about this issue?
- C. Write a script that is modeled after the podcasts you are familiar with. There will be opportunities for reflection and feedback.
- D. Record your podcast.
- E. You must still:
 1. Submit a works cited page of your sources (5+) on presentation day
 2. Craft the conversation through use of a basic script (some ad libbing is okay)
 3. Consider production value⁴⁵

I encourage teachers to consider what you want your students to learn by creating their podcast. Do you want them to learn about the life cycle of a butterfly and know it so well that they can teach it to others? Do you want them to write a narrative in the style of [This I Believe](#) and then record it? Do you want students to develop a podcast on how to be a good friend and use it as a SEL lesson?

Guide them on the best resources to use once they start. Internet research is, of course, always key, but what else can they use? Would they be able to interview others? Incorporate appropriate music? Use soundbites from the media?

Teacher Narrative

Podcasts are a great medium because they vary in their approach and thus are pretty versatile teaching and learning tools. Some are expository, some are persuasive, and all aim to be entertaining. As a writing teacher, I love the opportunities to talk about the choices we make as writers, and how those choices must be in response to our audience and our purpose.

This is a valuable opportunity for leadership, collaboration, and student agency, as they are put in control of so many aspects of their learning: what topic to study, what to say about that topic, what creative angle to use, the writing itself, and the recording process.

For example, one year, a group of students with different political ideologies worked together to create a podcast in which they civilly discussed abortion law. Not only was that a valuable research and writing

⁴⁵ **A note about technology:** My students have used Voice Record Pro and VoiceMemos, two free apps, to create their podcasts. Anchor is another free app that allows you to publish easily onto digital services like Spotify.

experience for those students, but it perhaps had a more important message than just the topic itself: that people with different views can come together and have a conversation about a controversial topic. This is something our world desperately needs right now.

Once the podcasts are created, the students have a product that they can use as a tool for advocacy. They can share it with their classmates to start, but look for other opportunities to broaden their audience as well. For instance, our school has an ELA night, where students are able to perform or present their work. This allows them to reach our school community as a whole, as well as interact with people from our local community who attend the event. There are also competitions for student podcasts. NPR, for example, runs a yearly contest in which students from grades 5-12 are able to submit podcasts, and the winning submission is shared on the air.

I find my students to be passionate and engaged in social issues, and I love to offer these opportunities for them to become part of a wider conversation and to put their ideas out into the world.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Courtney Henry teaches high school English at Nipmuc Regional High School in Upton, MA. She currently teaches both AP Language and Composition and Satire, a heterogeneous course offered to the school's seniors. She teaches in an inclusion setting, with some co-taught classes. She believes that all students should learn how to use their voices effectively to share their beliefs and make a positive impact on the world.



PRACTICE

Personalized Pathways

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE

Personalized Pathways take students' individual learning plans, styles, and preferences into account to fully engage students and guide them in the way they learn best. This practice is essential to student success and student agency because teachers are able to guide student learning based on their responses within the structured pathways and can adjust the learning sequences accordingly.⁴⁶

In addition to the Personalized Pathways that may be enacted at the classroom level, there are those that may be implemented school wide, at the district level, or even at the state level. Schools or districts may implement Personalized Learning Plans⁴⁷ that will guide each student's path throughout their learning journey. States may offer pathways as alternative routes to a diploma or as special degree designations for pre-identified pathways of study.⁴⁸ However, Personalized Pathways are also within the locus of control of individual teachers when they are focused on differentiating students' learning experiences.

For example, students have the opportunity to learn basic jump rope skills in a physical education class. Those students that succeed easily can be offered an extension activity with more challenging jump rope tricks and sequences, while other students in the class can benefit from additional basic skill development. These pathways can also be personalized according to student preference. For example, offering speed jump roping, integrating parkour tricks into jump rope, and demonstrating rhythmic dance with jump rope to show various access points for students with diverse interests and abilities.

Within Student-Centered Learning, Personalized Pathways focus on each individual student's learning needs, allowing students autonomy to decide curriculum and pedagogy rather than teachers mandating the same standardized curriculum for all students. Learning progressions show students how to better themselves and reach higher learning levels with appropriate support, giving them the chance to take a stake in their own learning.⁴⁹ Personalized Pathways become significant⁴⁹ as soon as teachers start designing their curriculum with their specific learners in mind. Pathways in this context consist of "one or more learning sequences, with students being able to navigate through those sequences."⁵⁰ As students begin to

⁴⁶ Salinas, S., & De Benito, B. *Construction of Personalized Learning Pathways through Mixed Methods*. *Comunicar: Media Education Research Journal*, 28(65), 31-41. 2020. Available online [at this link](#) as of August 2022.

⁴⁷ For more information about Personalized Learning Plans, see the Vermont Agency of Education's self-paced course on the topic, available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.

⁴⁸ For example, in Massachusetts, there are Innovation Pathways in designated districts that provide students college- and career-preparatory learning pathways and include significant work-based learning, as well as Early College Pathways that provide students concurrent high school and college credit. In Rhode Island, there are special pathways "endorsements" on students' diplomas when students take preapproved course clusters in certain areas.

⁴⁹ For example, see the Colorado Education Initiative's [Learning Progressions](#).

⁵⁰ Salinas & DeBenito, 2020. See prior citation.

learn and make their way through the pathway, teachers adjust future lessons and curriculum based on student success, stagnation, and failure.

Personalized Pathways also place responsibility for learning on the students themselves, promoting Student Agency. While teachers can adjust the overall curriculum based on the entire class's abilities and interests, students may also be offered various opportunities to structure their own learning based on skill and interest. In other words, the teacher can adjust the overall scope and sequence to guide curriculum based on their current students, while the students should have opportunities within each lesson or unit to extend, modify, and personalize their learning. Within our jump rope example, the teacher may guide the unit in the direction of parkour tricks with a class that is overall more interested in parkour. Throughout the unit, though, students can choose more challenging tricks or basic tricks, and also may have the option to explore different types of jump rope should that make more sense for their individual learning needs.

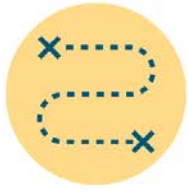
Key Considerations for Implementation in the Classroom

- How will you integrate personalized pathways into the teaching and learning process?
- How can you make learning pathways flexible to take evolving student needs into account?
- What do assessments look like in your classroom to consider personalized pathways for your students?
- How can we implement personalized learning pathways on a larger scale? Is there a way to standardize personalized learning?

Teacher Spotlights & Exemplar Tools

- "Using Goal-Setting to Motivate and Personalize Learning for PE Students" by Libby Bacher
- "Opportunities for Student Agency in Math with Personalized Pathways" by Debbie Logiudice

PERSONALIZED PATHWAYS TOOL



Using Goal-Setting to Motivate and Personalize Learning for P.E. Students

By Libby Bacher

TOOL DESCRIPTION

A process and accompanying worksheets to support student goal-setting in the interest of supporting students in creating their own “pathways” for learning within a given course.⁵¹

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

This activity was developed for elementary physical education students (3rd-5th graders) in a public school within a medium-sized urban district, but it can be applied to other subject areas.

TOOL & LINKS

- [Goal-Setting Worksheets](#)
- [SMART Goal Check-In Worksheet](#)
- [Video about How to Write a SMART Goal](#) (Khan Academy via Youtube)

About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

First, before delving into goal creation, we prepare by watching [videos about SMART goal-setting](#) practices, discussing why goal-setting is important now and in the future, and give various examples of different goals that may be applicable to different kinds of students.

Then, students are guided using a **SMART goals worksheet** to ensure their goal is **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**elevant, and **T**imely.

S	Make it S pecific	What do you want to accomplish? Getting at least 7 more laps on the PACER Test.
M	Make it M easurable	How will you know when you have accomplished your goal? When I get to at least the third level (10 laps).
A	Make it A ttainable	How can the goal be accomplished?

⁵¹ While much more complex, an analogous practice example would be a Personalized Learning Plan, which might be developed by a student in partnership with one or more educators to guide their pathway throughout their time at a given school. For an example, see [this Personalized Learning Planning guide from Edmentum](#).

		Exercising my lungs by practicing running in PE and at soccer practice.
R	Make it Relevant	Is this goal worth working hard to accomplish? Explain. Yes, because after it will help me later in life.
T	Make it Timely	By when will the goal be accomplished? Latest, June 2020.

Students are excited to set goals that are specific to their own personal lives and that they can connect to outside of school. In PE, they are encouraged to set a goal related to any part of physical activity or nutrition as long as it has all of the SMART goal requirements. **We then [check in on their goals](#)** about halfway through the school year and again at the end of the school year to see where we're at overall. I also participate in our goal-setting and share my successes and failures alongside my students.

Guidance: As I develop my own curriculum to incorporate personalized pathways based on student goal-setting, I keep these questions in mind.

- **Flexibility.** How can my curriculum be flexible to truly focus on student goals in a personalized way?
 - Understanding that this unit and activity will be completely shaped by the specific students in my classroom each school year, so being open to change is paramount.
 - Using this unit to adjust future curriculum based on student goals. For example, weaving more cardio-specific activities into the curriculum if many student goals are based on running more laps on the PACER test.
- **Focus on Marginalized Students.** How can I use this activity to center historically marginalized students?
 - Considering student examples, my own examples, and inspirational goal-setting videos that represent diverse perspectives, races, and identities.
- **Identity.** How does my own identity as a white woman who loves physical activity and sports affect the student goals I choose to focus my curriculum on?
 - Reflecting on my own biases and love for PE is important considering not all students feel the same way. I want all students to feel welcome and comfortable to set physical activity goals, especially if they do not typically succeed in PE.

Teacher Narrative

In my previous job as an afterschool coach, I noticed the effectiveness of our fitness testing program for our students to set achievable goals and work towards them in a structured way throughout the year. When I started teaching PE, I noticed that my students often struggled to connect an academic goal-setting mindset to “real-life” situations that often come about naturally in PE. I wanted my students to be able to set their

own fitness goals and be able to personalize them in order to increase motivation and participation in PE for all students, regardless of their skill level at the beginning of the school year.

As students progress with me as their teacher from 3rd to 5th grade, it's rewarding to see the structure fall away as the students are able to set their own fitness goals rather than adjusting a prewritten goal that I have created for them. As students progress toward their goal or complete it, I share their excitement and enthusiasm. I also notice as they take goal-setting and apply it to a different pathway in their life, whether academic or personal.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Libby Bacher teaches elementary (JK-5) Physical Education at the Amigos School in Cambridge, MA. She believes that P.E. as a subject embraces many components of Student-Centered Learning naturally by granting students autonomy, choice, and organic pathways for students to succeed in an environment outside of the academic classroom.



PERSONALIZED PATHWAYS TOOL



Opportunities for Student Agency in Math with Personalized Pathways

By Debbie Logiudice

TOOL DESCRIPTION

A quick primer (including infographics and guidance) for teachers about how to create personalized pathways within skills-based curriculum, with five different “entry levels” for teachers to consider based on their own contexts and readiness.

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

This guidance was developed by an elementary math interventionist in a small urban district, and with math specifically in mind, though the approaches are potentially applicable to other subject areas.

TOOL & LINKS

- [Student Agency in Math with Personalized Pathways Primer](#)

About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

Checking for Understanding prior to, during and after the unit allows you to monitor and support the learner pathways. The pre-check for understanding is a set of questions for the unit objectives. These questions can be both “entry level” and “at grade level” to determine the pathway for your students. This ensures that students who have had the objective experiences already are enhancing their learning and those that do not yet have enough experience will get what they need. The “post-check” is not the end if the students still need more experience. Those skills not yet acquired can be moved to a Tier 2 support or can be integrated into the next units.

Once you know the students’ pre-unit levels of understanding, you can design the “pathways” that support the learners in your room and differentiate as needed. Please see the *document linked above for additional detailed guidance related to this approach to personalization*.

Additional Considerations for Teachers

- When do I release responsibility to the students—
 - At which point in the unit do I release responsibility—early, middle, or end?
 - Are there ways I can give the opportunity for personalized pathway choices throughout the unit?
- What are some ways for the students to take control over their own learning today?

- What aspect of the unit objectives can I turn over to the students?
- What do I need to provide the students—and how much is “just right”? Consider the...
 - Objectives
 - Choices
 - Rubric
 - Materials
 - Feedback
 - Deadlines

Teacher Narrative

Creating Personalized Pathways in math class can be challenging, as we are given a set of standards for each grade level. Considerations for all lessons can be made using the collaborative education continuum so teachers can decide how far to move along the continuum, from teacher-driven to student-driven for any given assignment. With emerging evidence about the value of Student Agency, flipping the “I Do, We Do, You Do” teaching strategy provides students the opportunities to take control of what they learn, the way they learn, how they demonstrate that they learned the material, and their reflection of what they have learned. This will provide them ownership over their learning.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Debbie Logiudice has been teaching in the Cambridge Public Schools for 27 years. She has worked at the Maria L. Baldwin Elementary School as a 4th & 5th grade teacher, and is currently a K-5 math interventionist. She has been the lead teacher for math instruction for both 4th and 5th grade with a student centered trajectory approach to learning. Her class motto, “Go from what you know to what you don’t know!” helps students value their experience and bring it forward to approach new concepts with confidence and a growth mindset.



PRACTICE

Student Voice and Choice

Important note: Student Voice and Choice is a complex **Core Practice** that blends aspects of Student Agency and Flexible Structures, as well as other principles. The complexity of Student Voice and Choice is such that this chapter can only touch the surface of the practice. We recommend that teachers new to this practice consider exploring it in more depth, perhaps with the aid of some of the resources provided at the end of this chapter.

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE

Student Voice and Choice is an important practice that sees students as active participants in their education, empowering students to shape their own learning. Student Voice and Choice allows students the opportunity to “...choose to learn the way they learn best and to direct some aspects of their learning.”⁵²

Giving students “*choice*” means providing students with options and letting students select what works best for them. These choices can include the way in which content is learned, the process used to learn, or how to demonstrate an understanding of the content. For example, students may choose the topic in which they are writing about, the resources they use in their research, or the modality in which they are assessed.

Giving students “*voice*” means providing them the ability to shape their own learning by sharing ideas, designing their own projects, and monitoring their own learning. Though similar to choice, student voice gives students the ability to influence learning by providing opportunities for student input and expression. Student voice can be encouraged by giving students a platform to express themselves, such as a survey, an entrance ticket or question, or a morning meeting discussion.

Student Voice and Choice is essential to Student-Centered Learning, because voice and choice empower students and support Student Agency, especially within a broader context with Flexible Structures. Empowering students through voice and choice maximizes student engagement and allows students to emerge as stakeholders in their own learning. Choice is a powerful tool that gives students chances to incorporate their passions and strengths into the classroom and into their learning. Likewise, voice allows for students to express these passions and strengths.

A deceptively simple practice, Student Voice and Choice in reality has the potential to transform a classroom when leveraged in a way that simultaneously engages and empowers, ensuring that personalization does not leave students the subject of a computer algorithm but, instead, provides them the chance to grow their Executive Functioning muscles even as they are engaged in mastering content. At once the most accessible principle and the one with the greatest range of implementation, Student Voice and Choice is an excellent

⁵² Green, C., & Harrington, C. *How Implementing Voice & Choice Can Improve Student Engagement*. Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute (Blog). Available [at this link](#) as of August 2022.

first stop for teachers—and one that is valuable even for extremely experienced Student-Centered teachers to revisit for additional growth.

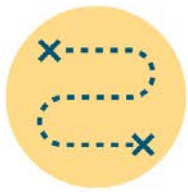
Key Considerations for Implementation in the Classroom:

- How are student voice and choice currently used in the classroom?
- Where in the existing curriculum are there opportunities to encourage student choice?
- Where in the existing curriculum are there opportunities to encourage student voice?
- How can the existing curriculum be altered to include more opportunities for student voice and choice?
- How can teachers determine student mastery of the standards while still honoring student voice and choice?
- How does students' grade and/or developmental level impact the amount of control that is appropriate for students to have?

Teacher Spotlights & Exemplar Tools:

- “Batter Up Choice Board: Incorporating Student Choice into a Multiplication Unit of Study” by Jessica Solomon
- “Employing Math in a Community Clean-Up Project to Engage Student Voice” by Erin Kimball

STUDENT VOICE & CHOICE TOOL



Batter Up Choice Board: Incorporating Student Voice into a Multiplication Unit of Study

By Jessica Solomon

TOOL DESCRIPTION

A Choice Board activity designed to be used at the end of a multiplication unit with the goal of providing skill practice and collecting artifacts of student learning to inform subsequent instruction, as an exemplar to inspire other educators interested in creating “choice boards”.

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

This activity was developed for middle school (8th grade) English Language Arts students in a diverse urban magnet school for students identified as gifted and talented.

TOOL & LINKS

- [Batter Up!](#) (Choice Board Exemplar)

About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

A one-size-fits-all approach is not part of a Student-Centered classroom, and Choice Boards offer a differentiated approach to learning that targets multiple intelligences while also taking student interests into consideration. How do you get started?

1. Determine what you want your students to learn, gain, or do through their experience.
2. Establish criteria that ensures every child will find activities that are the “right fit” for them
3. Create norms that allow for effective classroom management during Choice Board activity times.
4. Identify how you will both assess student learning and follow up if students demonstrate signs of struggle.

The easiest type of Choice Board is a simple 9-square grid in which an activity is placed in each square. Students then can complete three choices in a row, column, or diagonal in a Tic-Tac-Toe style. However, there are many different types of Choice Boards to choose from, and a simple Google search will bring you to a wide variety of resources you can use to effectively create and implement choice times in your classroom.

Please see the resource linked above as an example. More information about this exemplar:

The Batter Up Choice Board was created to provide performance assessment opportunities as we neared the end of a multiplication unit. The choices ranged in terms of cognitive demand, with more rigorous activities assigned higher point values. Though all students had to score 110 points in order to win their game, they could choose which activities could lead them there. Activities in the Dugout were worth five points, Singles were worth 10 points, Doubles were worth 20 points, Triples were worth 30 points, and Home Runs were worth 40 points. Each student needed to pick at least one activity from each tier, and they managed their materials with a Choice Board folder that I could evaluate as their games progressed. If I found that students were struggling with a particular skill or concept, I used the data provided by their learning artifacts to revisit those skills and concepts to ensure students moved towards mastery.

Teacher Narrative

In the past few years, as I've become more fluent in the principles of Student-Centered Learning—and therefore more reflective about how my practice influences learning outcomes—I've developed an interest in student choice as a driver of academic success. It can be understood as a component not only of student agency within the classroom environment, but also of other student-centered practices, including universal design, competency-based progressions, data-informed decision making, culturally responsive teaching, and project-based units of study. Student choice engenders a learning environment in which students feel empowered and in which the level of student engagement is notably improved. Their interests and identities are centered in the design stages of curriculum development, and they feel both respected and known.

I introduced Choice Boards as part of my mathematics units because they are an excellent way of providing choice to students as they gain mastery over new skills and concepts. They also allow me to maintain control of the curriculum and force me to be intentional in my determination of what activities will provide me with the data I need to drive student learning forward.

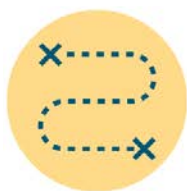
My observation is that students are collaborative and joyful when working on Choice Boards. I witnessed students proudly sharing their products with one another (unprompted!), asking clarifying questions, and providing feedback that helped drive student learning forward. Many of them used others' products (for instance, the memory card game) to help them practice their own skills. Though one might hesitate to create and incorporate choice boards in their practice because of a concern that students will gravitate towards less rigorous tasks, norms can be established that set expectations for student engagement, and Choice Board activities can be designed to ensure that every option is designed to offer students the opportunity to appropriately meet learning standards and benchmarks.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Jessica Solomon is a third grade teacher at The Rashi School in Dedham, Massachusetts. She embraces Student-Centered Learning practices as a way to more fully and authentically engage students across the curriculum. Her goal is for the students to become expert learners who are purposeful, resourceful, knowledgeable, and strategic in their approach to learning.



STUDENT VOICE & CHOICE TOOL



Employing Math in a Community Clean-Up Project to Engage Student Voice

By Erin Kimball

TOOL DESCRIPTION

A lesson plan and related materials for a community-minded project driven by student choice.

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

This lesson was initially developed for fifth graders at an urban charter school but, with modifications, could be applicable for students of all ages.

TOOL & LINKS

- [Clean-Up Project Lesson Steps](#)
- [Student-Facing Slides for Lesson](#) (to inspire other teachers in developing their own)
- [KWL Chart](#) (used within the Lesson Plan)
- [Letter-Writing Materials](#) (printable PDF) and [Exemplar Letters](#)

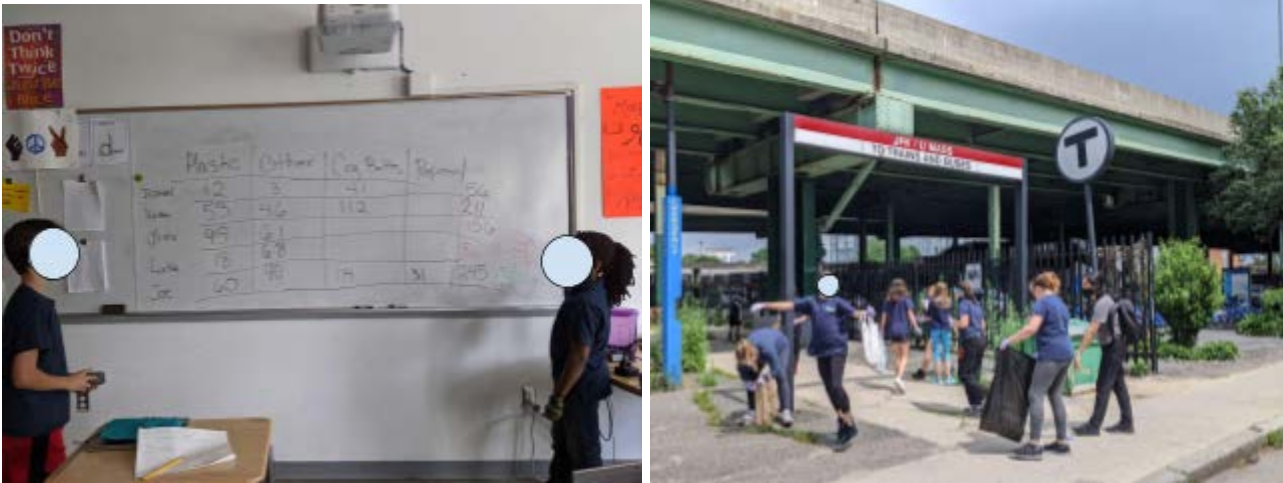
About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

Linked above is a step-by-step teacher plan, as well as excerpts from the student-facing materials, for this four-day lesson that explores pollution as a way of learning math. It provides opportunities for voice and choice. (Notably, teachers could pick the location for the clean up based on student choice or choose a different issue to explore actively with a similar approach that incorporates service-learning.)

Guidance per Erin

- Ask yourself: How do my students see themselves in this subject? It may be helpful to interview your students or spend time in their community.
- Tally how many choices students make for themselves in one class. Everything from where they sit, when they can get a pencil, which question they start with or how they answer a problem can count!
- How often are students the knowledge-keepers? Can students answer questions for each other rather than have a teacher share the answer? Are students asking the questions or making the observations that lead to the conclusion or is a teacher walking them there?

Photos from Implementation



Teacher Narrative

“But when are we going to use this?!” As a math teacher, I heard this a lot. I was frustrated. Shouldn’t my students trust that I’m teaching this for a reason? They’re going to need this next year in school! I worked to make lessons more gamified and fun, but still heard “but why do I have to learn this?” I realized that my students had a point. If the content isn’t relevant to them, how can I ask them to connect with it, internalize it, and be successful with it?

I slowed my frantic rush to remake every lesson with what I thought they would like and started to think more about how to make lessons more real for them and embed more Student Voice and Choice in my class. Conversations and student surveys were easy gateways to learn more about my students. They shared their love of their neighborhood, anime, art, an interest in the environment (largely sparked by their science lessons earlier in the year), and the desire to feel like they were “doing something.”

While I haven’t found a way to tie in the Anime, I pulled many of these ideas together to create a Clean-Up project that centered on Student Voice and Choice. Students would:

- Work in groups to create a hypothesis about what kind of trash they would find the most of;
- Create a way to answer the question and make a tracking system for their data;
- Find a system within their group to decide how they would tally their findings, carry the trash and pick it up;
- Use their data to identify the problem and several possible solutions; and
- Choose a solution and the appropriate audience for it and then write a letter to work towards creating change.

Not every unit has a full project like this yet, but I’m working on making my lessons more student-focused and I’m leaning more and more on my students as the experts.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Erin Kimball teaches 5th grade math at the Boston Collegiate Charter School. As a math teacher, she would hear far too often, “but when are we going to use this?!” She was frustrated but realized that her students had a point. If the content isn’t relevant to them, she realized, how can she ask them to connect with it, internalize it and be successful with it?



SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Written Publications & Works Cited

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Other Web-Based Resources

- [The BEST \(Building Essential Skills Today\) Self-Direction Toolkit](#), developed by educators from throughout New Hampshire (for more information, see [best-future.org](#)).
- [Colorado Education Initiative—Learning Progressions](#), a multimedia resource featured as part of the Assessment for Learning Project.
- [The Continuing Educator Podcast, Episode 3: How Culturally Responsive Teaching Enables Student Agency](#) from NWEA online, a podcast episode exploring the intersection between these and related student-centered principles and practices.
- [Create Personalized Learning Plans for Every Student](#), an interactive PDF and how-to guide from Edmentum (2021).
- [Flexible Pathways Self-Paced Course modules](#), from the Vermont Agency for Education, a guide for educators about implementing flexible pathways in schools.
- [Learning and Assessment Pathways](#), a website depicting and explaining Pathways in the context of a Proficiency-Based school, from Great Schools Partnership; includes a downloadable PDF of the infographic.
- [LearnStorm Growth Mindset: How to Write a SMART Goal](#), a video tutorial from Khan Academy on YouTube.
- [Makin' It Personal](#), a podcast that leverages stories from the field to inspire teachers to personalize their teaching and learning, put out by [PersonalizeSC](#), a project of the South Carolina Department of Education.
- [Personalized Learning Paths](#), a multimedia HundrED resource developed by Pekka Peura from Vantaa, Finland.
- [Personalized Learning Planning Process Self-Paced Course modules](#), from the Vermont Agency for Education, a guide for educators about implementing Personalized Learning Plans for students.
- [Renaissance EdWords: Student Agency](#), a website with definitions, info and ideas about Student Agency
- [Secondary School Flexible Scheduling Structures for Personalized Pathways](#), a helpful infographic about incorporating opportunities for Student Agency within the school day, produced by the Center for Collaborative Education.
- [Student Leadership Competencies Self-Evaluation Measurements](#), free, downloadable self-evaluation tools for students in alignment with eight competencies around Student Leadership.
- [Student-Led Conferences Self-Paced Course modules](#), from the Vermont Agency for Education, a guide for educators about implementing Student-Led Conferences.
- [Virginia Student-Led Assessment Network Resources](#) curated as part of the Assessment for Learning project.

Closing Word

Imperfection as a Virtue: Embracing the Unfulfilled Potential of Student-Centered Learning

It wasn't until the final stages of developing this Toolkit that I learned the most important lesson from it and from the **teachers** who were its lead writers: the vast power of the unattainable, unfulfilled potential of Student-Centered Learning.

When I joined The Teacher Collaborative team in 2021, I brought with me a healthy background in Student-Centered Learning, both from my own educational practices and from my former role as Director of the Massachusetts Personalized Learning Network, a role which brought me into the regional and national conversation about personalized and student-centered practices. I came to the organization and this endeavor as an SCL evangelist, touting the ways in which Student-Centered Learning can, when implemented correctly, transform schools to be more equitable, ensuring inclusion without sacrificing “rigor,” creating lifelong learners instead of passive recipients of education.

I still believe this. However, I have also spent enough time in this field to have been dosed with plenty of skepticism about this aspirational belief. As countless case studies (some of which I've led) have shown, schools that embody the full framework of Student-Centered Learning exist only very rarely, and usually in very ideal “hothouse” contexts unattainable for most schools and inaccessible to most students, at least for the foreseeable future. The supportive context for true Student-Centered Learning requires:

- **Buy-in:** An engaged and supportive community (which includes the parents, school boards, and agencies that have a say on policy).
- **Professional Learning:** A teaching force provided with high quality professional learning that employs most of the same learner-centered approaches that they are expected to bring to their students.
- **Change Leadership:** Effective leaders at all levels, always integrating student, parent, and teacher perspectives, facilitating the move toward new approaches.
- **An Equity Lens:** All parties at the table must have a well-developed equity lens that is prepared to think critically about traditional educational approaches and how they have reinforced racism, ableism, paternalism, and other systems of oppression.
- **Wellness Systems:** Students and adults that are part of a school community require systems of support around their social-emotional learning needs, the social services they require, and access to resources to support their health and wellness.

Few educators work in schools that are provided with all of these necessary supports; and few have the autonomy and capacity necessary to enact full-blown Student-Centered Learning without a broader context

of support. Certainly this is true in Massachusetts, where seat time requirements and high-stakes tests still drive teaching and learning; but even without these factors, pure SCL implemented at scale would be far from attainable.

It would be easy to despair. After all, incremental progress is slow, and meanwhile so many students—especially low-income students, students of color, and nontraditional learners—are languishing in schools that were never designed for their success.

However, if this Toolkit and this past year of working with teachers at The Teacher Collaborative has taught me anything, it's that there are a great many more SCL success stories than this pessimistic picture would suggest. Imperfection isn't stopping educators from implementing astounding student-centered units and lessons, piloting practices inspired by research, and sharing innovative ideas with their colleagues. In fact, only by embracing imperfection can we create a context for teachers that encourages experimentation and audacity. If we required high-fidelity SCL at first blush, we'd be closing the door to amazing action-research in Student-Centered Learning happening at the grassroots level—within individual classrooms, in schools across the Commonwealth (and beyond).

From this kind of grassroots work in Student-Centered Learning, after all, our SCL Leadership Co-Lab was born. Every teacher-author whose practices are featured in this book came to the Co-Lab with an area of expertise acquired through their own efforts; within the Co-Lab, these teachers created a common language, facilitated by the framework developed by our team. None of these teachers left the Co-Lab ready to implement perfect SCL in a perfectly supportive context; instead, they left with new ideas that will help them to deepen their own practice—and to become ambassadors for this pedagogy.

And, of course, they also made their mark by contributing to this Toolkit, in the hopes that more of their peers will be inspired, rather than cowed, by the unfulfilled potential of Student-Centered Learning—and continue toward it. For as long as it remains imperfect and raw, teachers can co-construct SCL, ensuring that it's always the product of current, energetic, voluntary development. This kind of imperfection supports the iterative process that brings out the very best in teaching and learning.

Will we ever attain the Platonic Ideal of Student-Centered Learning? Perhaps not. But by pursuing it, we're certainly going to bring in new allies in hopes of creating a mandate for change. Along the way, we'll make schools better for students—classroom by classroom, teacher by teacher, always in a state of aspiration.

–Diana Lebeaux, Senior Director of Programs, The Teacher Collaborative