

Focus on Student Learning

Teachers who are successful in traditional classrooms where they are at the center of instruction often find it difficult to relinquish control to more student-centered activities that are less predictable and organized. "Why should I change when everything is going well?" they wonder. Like students who resist activities without clear-cut right answers, teachers occasionally have difficulty coping with the complexity of a classroom where students take control of their own learning.

In order for students to learn 21st century skills, however, such as higher-order thinking, teamwork, and problem solving, they must be engaged in complex projects that resemble real-life work in different disciplines. They also must receive continual information about their learning progress. Research clearly shows the positive effect that this kind of assessment has on student learning (Black, et al., 1998).

Although there is good reason to believe that student-centered instruction and formative assessment have the power to motivate students to become engaged in their own learning, the path to self-direction is often not an easy one. "Students who have grown used to being tacit observers or "sleepy onlookers" may well resent having to work harder, especially when such passive learning roles are the norm in other subjects." One teacher in Black's project was accused of not doing her job correctly because she did not give notes which students could memorize for tests.

Teachers may also find giving up traditional practices difficult. Formative assessment de-emphasizes grades and emphasizes learning. Students are asked to set goals and monitor their own progress. They are encouraged to be creative, to take risks, and to ask questions. In short, they are expected to care about their own learning. For some students and teachers this is a huge leap.

Traditional classrooms that focus on extrinsic rewards provide few opportunities for students to think about themselves as learners, rather than just as students.

When the classroom culture focuses on rewards, gold stars, grades, or class ranking, then pupils look for ways to obtain the best marks rather than to improve their learning. One reported consequence is that, when they have any choice, pupils avoid difficult tasks. They also spend time and energy looking for clues to the "right answer." Indeed, many become reluctant to ask questions out of a fear of failure (Guskey, 2005).

Grades are not going to disappear from most classrooms, but teachers can work to minimize their importance, focusing on the intrinsic value of learning from a task and self-assessment, rather than on accomplishing easily countable and verifiable tasks.

If students are to take control of their own learning, they need instruction and support in specific skills such as collaboration, problem solving, and critical thinking. Like the teachers in Black's study, teachers who use formative assessment effectively need to expand the way they think about student learning. Teaching must become less about delivering subject-area knowledge and more about engineering instruction around authentic tasks that allow students to practice working with new content in ways that challenge their thinking and help them develop 21st century skills of self-direction and collaboration.