Evaluating Assessment
Using Assessment to Empower Students and Enhance Learning

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This action research project investigates how formative assessment practices, as well as student self-evaluations, might alleviate some of the pressures of assessment, and empower students to take ownership of their learning.

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**Assidere: To sit beside....

My students sit, anxiously waiting, as I hand back their assignments. The tension in the air is palpable. Twenty-six pairs of eyes follow me as I walk around the room, handing back their papers. “Relax!” I tell them with a smile, “it’s just marks!” This flippant comment has the opposite effect; many students groan, while others remain silent, still, anticipating the worst. As the students receive their assignments, two distinct facial expressions are evident around the room: relief, and disappointment. “What did you get?” the successful children call out. “I got Meeting Expectations! How did you do?” I glance around the room and catch the eye of one defeated looking student. “Please keep it to yourself,” I remind the class, “these marks are just for you alone. And remember, READ the feedback!” Upon hearing this, a few students pause and consider the meticulous comments I have spent hours writing, while others shove their assignments deep into the recesses of their backpacks, never to be seen again. What is the point of providing feedback, if the students don’t even bother to read it? Frustrated, I whisper to myself, “there has got to be another way!”

The Latin root of the word assessment is *assidere*, which means *to sit beside, or sit with* (Bower, 2013). Seeing the tension in my students’ faces that day, as they anxiously waited to receive feedback from me, did not feel as though I was beside them, so to speak, in the assessment process. When did we as educators lose our way, and veer off from this initial understanding of the word?
My Purpose and Initial Questions

“Educators find themselves in a difficult position. They are part of the transition, laden down with the burdens of the past, while contemplating the possibilities of the future. They know how it has always been and have a great deal invested in maintaining stability, but at the same time, many of them acknowledge that it just doesn’t feel right. What better way to bring some clarity to a murky subject than to return to first principles: What is our purpose? What are we trying to accomplish? What is assessment for?” (Earl, 2003, p.11-12).

When beginning this journey of action research, these were the questions that were going round in my mind. Why do we assess students? Is it to sort and categorize them? Promote them on to the next grade, the next college, and ultimately the next job? Or is it to inform, extend, and enhance learning? Is assessment about accountability and final scores, or is it actually about student learning? While I know what I wish to be true, that assessment informs and augments learning, and empowers students to further their understanding, I am not confident that this is necessarily the case in our education system today. Until we as educators stop and think about these questions, I do not believe we can truly examine the assessment practices that are used in our current schools.

The concept of authentic, meaningful, and worthwhile assessment has both intrigued and troubled me for some time now. As author, professor, researcher, and Ontarian director of assessment Lorna M. Earl (2003) explains, “society is divided about the purpose of education, and as a result, is divided about the purpose of assessment” (p.11). In our current education system, where curriculum is ever changing, and reporting procedures are varied and undefined, no one seems to agree on ‘best practice’ with regards to assessment. In my opinion, the ultimate goal of assessment should be similar to what Earl (2003) illustrates. She explains that assessment should inform learning, so that students become their own best assessors, where they monitor what they are learning, make changes, and know for themselves if and when they truly understand.
something. This action research project is in response to Earl’s statement, which led to the following initial research questions:

1. *Does actively involving students in the process of assessing empower them to take ownership of their learning?*

2. *Does focusing on self-assessment promote students’ self-awareness with regards to learning, and does it help them to set realistic learning goals for themselves?*

It is my hope that focusing on self-assessment in my classroom will:

- Empower students to take ownership of their learning
- Allow teachers to focus more on student learning and less on summative evaluations (like final marks or letter grades)
- Allow for students to take risks, make mistakes, and reflect on the learning process
- Minimize the anxiety and pressures of receiving assessments from the teacher
- Shift the responsibility of success and learning onto the student

I realize that these are very lofty goals, and ones that cannot likely be reached within a two month long stretch. Through this action research it is my hope to begin to examine the role self-assessment can play in student learning, and to provide a space for student self-reflection and evaluation to continue beyond the completion of this project.

Throughout this research project I explore how students feel about various forms of assessments, and investigate how students might emotionally engage with self-assessments to further their learning. More specifically I focus on celebrating mistakes and failures in learning, and inquire into whether this can alleviate some of the pressures associated with final assessments. I explore assessment through the use of the cognitive tools associated with Romantic Understanding (Kieran Egan’s term for understanding that comes with the acquisition of
written language), in particular the heroic qualities of perseverance and resilience when learning (Egan, 1997).

**Situating Myself**

I teach in a school that is constantly revisiting and revising how we assess, report and communicate student learning. With the introduction of the new curriculum drafts in 2013, my school and district decided to participate in a pilot project to explore ways of evaluating student learning. With administrative support, many staff members at my school, myself included, decided to cease using letter grades, and consider alternate ways of reporting. We adopted new language to categorize students’ successes and areas of improvement, and used performance standards to evaluate student learning and link it to curricular competencies. Students were now evaluated based on the following four performance indicators for grade level expectations: Not Yet Meeting Expectations, Approaching Expectations, Meeting Expectations, and Exceeding Expectations. I spent a great deal of time unpacking the meaning behind these indicators with my students over the years. Together with my classes we came up with definitions and criteria for each level of achievement, and produced examples for each of the four performance indicators. An example of a class Writing Rubric breakdown that we created is shown. This Writing Rubric is from 2014, and was done with a class of Grade four and five students.
I have always felt it important to be transparent with my students with regards to assessment, and believe that including them in the process of creating criteria is crucial. While I considered it necessary to create these rubrics and assessment guidelines with my students, something did not sit quite right with this way of communicating achievements. While I agreed with the decision to move beyond letter grades and formal report cards in the school, I still was not content with this move to performance scales and grade level expectations. It seemed as if we had moved from one form of categorization to another. Was ‘Approaching Expectations’ not simply another (albeit more descriptive), way of saying your child got a ‘C’? It was this discomfort with current assessment practices that led me to explore student self-assessment and risk taking for my action research project.

**Situating the Research**

Participants in this action research project were fifty-three grade six and seven students from two classes, (my teaching partner’s and my own) within my elementary school. My class is
comprised of twenty-six students, ten in grade six and sixteen in grade seven. The other class is made up of twenty-seven students, with ten in grade six and seventeen in grade seven. Between the two classes there are thirty girls and twenty-three boys. There are two distinct programs at my elementary school: the standard Neighbourhood program, and the Intensive Fine Arts program. The students in my research project are a part of the Fine Arts stream, which is a choice program at the school, and is one of only two in the district. The elementary school itself is designated as an inner city school, and is situated in an area of many low-income households. As a result, the school is very complex, and is comprised of students with a very wide range of needs, abilities, and designations.

From the fifty-three students participating in the project, six have Individual Education Plans, ten have behavioural designations and present with mild to severe behaviour challenges, seven have learning disabilities, six are diagnosed with ADHD, one is a child with autism, and ten attend daily pull out learning support classes. While many of the students are English Language Learners, most are fluent in English. Four students are new to Canada and speak minimal English. Multiple students also see our school childcare worker and counsellor, for social and emotional issues and concerns. In my classroom I have a part time Education Assistant, who is there until lunchtime each day.

My situation with these grade six and seven students in the Fine Arts program is unique in that I have taught this same group of students for the past three, and in some cases four, years. Since beginning teaching grade three/four in the Fine Arts program in 2013, I have continued to move up a grade each year, working with the same group. As a result, I have a very trusting and close relationship with these students. My teaching partner and I work alongside one another, team teaching many lessons and often treating our two classes as one cohesive group.
**Research Delimitations**

In order to make my research project manageable, I chose to delimit it in certain ways. One of the delimitations of this project was that I did not include students from other classes in the school that I have not taught. I did this simply because it would have been too many students participating in the study, and I would not have had the means to analyze all the data. It would have been beneficial for this study to have opinions and ideas from a wider range of students, and were I to continue research in the area of assessment, I would be sure to include students from a variety of classes. I say this because I believe many of my students are already comfortable self-assessing their own work as it is something they have done for the past three years. It would have been interesting to see students’ reactions to self-assessments had they never done them before.

It also would be interesting to include students from other schools or school districts in the study. As I mentioned previously, my school district and elementary school is participating in a pilot project that examines new and alternative ways of documenting and communicating student learning, including the use of online portfolios and various performance standards. Letter grades are no longer used in my elementary school, nor in most elementary schools in the district. As a result, almost all the students in my study have never received letter grades before. I presume students’ definitions and notions of assessment might differ had they been in a school or district where letter grades were still the norm, and it would be interesting to compare their ideas to those of my students.

**Literature Review**

This literature review is organized based on the following themes that I used to conduct my research: the purpose of assessment, the impact of evaluation on students, and formative
evaluation as well as student self-assessment practices. Below, I present and evaluate the research I have found concerning each theme.

**The Purpose of Assessment**

When beginning my research into evaluation practices, it was crucial to first investigate how the literature explains the *purpose* or overall goal of assessment. The purpose of education itself is a hotly debated issue, one that most teachers, educational researchers, administrators, school boards, and governments do not all agree upon. Along with the conflicting views about the role of education in our society, come the often incompatible beliefs about the goals of assessment. Educational theorist and researcher Alfie Kohn (1994), suggests that there are three main objectives of assessment: to sort or categorize students based on ability, to encourage them using marks as extrinsic motivators, and to provide feedback to students so that they can learn more effectively. Author, professor, researcher, and Ontarian director of assessment Lorna M. Earl (2003), identifies three similar purposes which include: to support learning, to report achievement, and to satisfy the demands for public accountability. Both Kohn (1994), and Earl (2003), challenge our current education system, claiming that it focuses too heavily on marking, grading, and ranking students, and caution that prioritizing grades and assessments causes students to focus more on *how* they are doing, and less on *what* they are actually learning.

Canadian educator and author Joe Bower (2013) concurs, professing that in his experience, students who receive letter grades are reduced to doing things *only* to get assessed by a teacher, and that the love of learning is lost. Educators and researchers David L. Bolton and John M. Elmore (2013) explain that, “ideally, the role of assessment in education is to empower students. Assessment provides feedback to the students, which helps them judge whether they have
learned” (p.128). In my journey as an educator thus far, I have often worried that students only complete things in order to obtain marks. Kohn’s (1994) third explanation of assessment as effective feedback that informs learning, is what I believe to be the most important goal of assessment. In the following excerpt from her book, *Assessment as Learning: Using Classroom Assessment to Maximize Student Learning*, Earl (2003) explains the potential purposes of assessment.

Teachers and administrators have the potential to use assessment as an exciting and powerful means for enhancing learning. Getting classroom assessment right is not a simplistic, either-or situation. It is a complex mix of challenging personal beliefs, rethinking instruction, and learning new ways to assess for different purposes. It requires educators who are excited about learning, imaginative, and willing to formulate strategies of ‘resistance’ that allow them to use assessment in productive ways in their classrooms, and honour the complexity of learning and assessment (pp. 15-16).

This description encapsulates my own interpretation of assessment, and was part of the inspiration behind this action research project.

**The Impact of Evaluation on Students**

My own research questions focus on student ownership and learning, and so it was critical for me to examine the literature regarding the impact that evaluating learning could have on students. Educational researcher and professor Terence J. Crooks (1988) reviewed and evaluated a variety of assessment practices used by teachers in both elementary and high schools. He produced a number of recommendations for educational practice, and concluded that, “classroom
evaluation has powerful direct and indirect impacts, which may be positive or negative, and thus deserves very thoughtful planning and implementation” (p. 438). Rather than focusing on letter grades in elementary and early high school, Crooks (1988) recommends that assessment take the form of effective, ongoing feedback. He maintains that placing too much emphasis on the grading function of evaluation leads to, “undesirable effects including reduction of intrinsic motivation, debilitating evaluation anxiety, ability attributions for success and failure that undermine student effort, lowered self-efficacy for learning in the weaker students, reduced use and effectiveness of feedback to improve learning, and poorer social relationships among the students” (p. 468). This point of view is especially significant today as many schools in British Columbia are considering postponing the use of letter grades until high school. As I mentioned previously, I chose to cease using letter grades in my own practice a few years ago for reasons similar to what Crooks (1988) describes.

Bolton and Elmore (2013) concur, and caution that, “assessment can disempower students by making them feel inadequate and generating feelings of avoidance” (p.128). They explain that final marks or letter grades often cause students to compete against each other as they strive to be ‘the best’. This can lead to increased levels of anxiety and stress, and portrays learning as a competition or a race that can be ‘won’, rather than an ongoing journey.

Rick Stiggins and John Chappuis (2005) are two researchers who work at the Assessment Training Institute in Portland, OR. They engaged in a decade long research project that examined how elementary classroom assessment practices could help students become confident learners, which produced some very interesting findings. Through their research, Stiggins and Chappuis (2005) investigated how to motivate low performing students in schools. They explain that, “successful students enjoy the rewards of their own success at learning. But what of those
students who have not experienced success?” (p.12). Their research found that involving students in the evaluation process, and inviting them in as partners of assessment, especially helped raise the marks of lower achievers on summative tasks. Stiggins and Chappuis (2005) provided four suggestions for increasing student achievement, which are as follows:

a) focus on clear purposes
b) provide accurate reflections of achievement
c) provide students with continuous access to descriptive feedback on improvement in their work (versus infrequent judgmental feedback)
d) bring students into the classroom assessment processes (p.14)

I strive to regularly include these four aspects of assessment into my teaching. Through this action research project, I aim to be more purposeful of how I incorporate these suggestions into my practice, and more cognizant of what the outcomes for my students may be.

**Formative Evaluation and Student Self-Assessment Practices**

Heidi Andrade, Joanna Hefferen, and Maria Palma (2014), engaged in an action research project called “Artful Learning Communities”, that explored ways that formative assessment practices in the arts can increase student engagement and promote and augment learning. They worked with ninety-six Fine Arts teachers, and forty-eight thousand eight to twelve year old students in high poverty schools in the United States. Their study found that students benefited the most when presented with the following three things: “(1) An understanding of the targets or goals for their learning; (2) knowledge of the gap between those goals and their current state; and (3) knowing how to close the gap through relearning and revision” (Andrade, Hefferen, and Palma, 2014, p. 34). They claimed that by having teachers focus on these three aspects of assessment, students were increasingly able to evaluate their own learning, thus becoming more engaged with the process of learning itself.
Karen Makowsky, one second-grade visual arts teacher involved in this action research project, created a bulletin board with her class that emphasized the notion of making mistakes and reflecting upon them when creating works of art. She called this an ‘Oops!’ board, and encouraged her students to share their artistic ‘happy accidents’, as well as written reflections for how they planned to revisit and improve their work. Andrade, Hefferen, and Palma (2014), propose that, “when students become their own teachers, they exhibit attributes that are most desirable for learners, including self-monitoring, self-assessing, and self-teaching” (p. 40). This literature was particularly valuable to me given that my school is also a high poverty Fine Arts based school. For the purposes of my action research project, I chose to develop this idea of an ‘Oops!’ board to include academic subjects beyond just the visual arts, and to investigate how celebrating mistakes and failures, and reflecting on the process of learning, can assist students in becoming engaged, independent learners.

Educator Joe Bower (2013) engaged in his own inquiry project, that investigated how eliminating all forms of official marks and grading over the course of a term could impact student learning. He chose to only provide formative assessment in the form of oral and written feedback, and did not present any kinds of final marks on assignments. Instead, he had each student collect evidence of their learning, and compile it in a portfolio. He explains that, “the evidence selected for the portfolio is not just the stuff students did well; mistakes and failures are also included, not as a means to punish students, but to show growth and model that mistakes and failures are our allies in our collective pursuit of learning” (p. 165). At the end of the term, he met with each student to discuss their portfolios, and had the students choose their own final grade for the report card. Bower (2013) rationalizes that assessment should be a decision that is made with students, not for them, and that they should be a part of the overall decision of final marks.
claims that his students are able to provide genuine evidence that demonstrates their learning in the portfolios, and that they can honestly self-assess their own work. Bower (2013) observes that, “it is amazing how close they [students] come to picking the same grade that I would pick. Interestingly enough, when there is a disagreement, they are usually too hard on themselves” (p. 165). Bower’s proposal of abolishing final marks and assessments all together is one I find to be extremely interesting. Perhaps not for the purpose of this action research project, however as I continue along my path of investigating assessment, I hope to attempt something similar with my students.

Professors and researchers Louis Volante and Danielle Becket (2011) interviewed twenty teachers in Ontario about their understanding and use of formative assessment and student self-evaluation strategies. Their research found that, similar to what the literature on assessment illustrates, there is great tension between formative and summative assessment practices. While most teachers seem to recognize the value and importance of providing formative feedback to students, many struggle with then transforming this feedback into final marks for a report card. Another difficulty Volante and Becket (2011) unearthed through their research was that many teachers find it challenging to get their students to actually use the formative feedback they provide. They explain that, “for the most part, teachers in this study struggled with finding creative ways to make their students fully use their formative feedback” (p.246). This is something I have grappled with in my own practice. How can we ensure that students actually use the feedback we provide to further their learning?

One way that Volante and Becket (2011) suggest is through student self-assessment. Through their research they found that, “teachers...shared the understanding that formative assessment performed solely by the teacher is missing an integral component whereby students
reflect and take ownership of their own learning” (Volante and Becket, 2011, p. 246). Stiggins and Chappuis (2005) agree, explaining that when students are partners in the assessment process, they monitor their own levels of achievement, which shifts the responsibility of learning and success onto the student. It is noteworthy to mention that both researchers indicate the importance of the role of the teacher in providing guidance to students as they reflect on their learning.

My action research project examines the themes mentioned in this literature review. I investigate students’ feelings towards various assessment practices, and explore how recognizing and praising mistakes might transform students’ opinions of the assessment process and of themselves as learners.

**And so it begins....**

“Action research is less about reporting objective discoveries, and more about relating personal insights into what happened” (Parsons, Hewson, Adrian & Day, 2013, p. 129).

The following is my own observations, interpretations, and personal narrative about delving into self-assessment, risk taking, and student learning.

I decided to begin this project by finding out what notions and beliefs my students already held about assessment. In my classroom, assessment is a word that is thrown around often, and I was interested to hear how my students would define it. In my three years teaching this same group of students, they have many times assessed their work; they have completed many self-assessments, peer-assessments, and used rubrics to evaluate their assignments. I also frequently
tell the students that I will be assessing their learning, so I assumed that the word would not be foreign to them.

We began with a class discussion, where I asked the students to collaborate and brainstorm any words that they associated with assessment. I explained that there were no wrong answers, and that I just wanted to hear their thoughts and conceptions. I recorded all their ideas in a large web on the front board (see photo below).

Students were initially hesitant to share their ideas, and it took a little bit of prompting from me to get the brainstorm flowing. This could have been because they had never stopped to really think about assessment before, or it could also have been because I had all fifty-three students in one room, and they were uncomfortable speaking in front of such a large group. I believe it was a combination of the two.

Some shared that assessment was a way to receive feedback on assignments, and others explained that it was a way of getting marks. Many of the students responded that assessments were ways to show their work, and that it most often took the form of projects, quizzes, or answering questions. I was surprised to find that almost all the students considered assessment to be a mainly summative action. Up until this point in my teaching career I had considered myself
an educator who was pretty good at providing ongoing feedback, or formative assessment. I thought that I was someone who took the time to discuss with my students how they were doing, gave written feedback on assignments, and allowed space for students to self-reflect on their own learning. It seemed perhaps that I was mistaken! Despite my efforts to employ methods of formative assessment, and to provide ample opportunities for students to self-assess their own work, this was not how the students themselves seemed to define assessment.

I was also shocked to hear that some of the first words my students associated with assessment were tests and quizzes. I very rarely use tests or quizzes to assess student learning, and have openly discussed with my students why I do not believe in simply taking a test to show understanding of a topic. So why did my students immediately equate assessment to test taking? Had my efforts to steer away from the traditional summative test been in vain? Or is this form of summative assessment so ingrained in our school culture that even students believe it to be the ultimate form of evaluating learning? As Earl (2003) cautions, “existing assessment practices are so deeply rooted in our collective intellectual and political consciousness that they have been almost impossible to challenge” (p.11). Although this saddened me to think that my students might never escape the pressures of summative evaluations, it reinforced my passion for empowering students as advocates in their own learning, and validated my purpose in this research project.

**Change in Direction**

While initially I was hoping to investigate methods of self-assessment and how they impacted student learning, early on in my action research journey it seemed this was not solely where my interests were situated. At 3am one morning, I was lying awake brooding over my
project, and worrying that while I seemed to be collecting adequate data regarding my students’ thoughts and opinions about assessment, I did not feel that I was really answering my preliminary research questions. It struck me at that moment that perhaps I was shifting my focus slightly, and instead modifying my questions to include the following:

- *Are students more willing to take risks if they are not being assessed?*
- *Can celebrating mistakes and the process of learning alleviate some of the pressures around doing well and creating a ‘final product’ to demonstrate learning?*

It was at this point that I decided to incorporate into my project the heroic qualities of perseverance and resilience with regards to learning, and focus on the anxieties and pressures that are often associated with assessment.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Prior to embarking on my action research journey, I needed to follow research ethics procedures in creating and gathering parent consent forms for my students (*see Appendix A: Parental Consent Form*). I also wanted to be sure that my students were aware of the focus and purpose of my project, and so took the time to explain my research questions and proposed data collection methods to them. I made it clear that participation in my study was completely voluntary, and that their parents, and themselves as students, could opt out at any time. Overall, the idea of participating in a study for ‘Ms. Albach’s homework project’ was met with eager enthusiasm. While initially it was somewhat challenging for parents to return the signed consent forms, in the end I received the majority of consent from both parents and students.
For this project I chose to collect mainly qualitative data, gathered from the students in the forms of class discussions, observations, written student work, surveys, and a focus group. In my attempts to gain meaningful insights into students’ notions of taking risks and assessing themselves to further their learning, I wanted to be sure to use a variety of data collection tools.

**Initial Definitions of Assessment**

During the same introductory class discussion when I asked my students to brainstorm words that they associated with assessment, I also invited them to create a definition for assessment, in small groups. I decided to use this definition as my first piece of data, to gain insight into how my students would explain the term in their own words. With the entire group of fifty-three students, I asked them to answer the following two questions:

1. *What is assessment?*

2. *Why do we assess learning?*

They chose their own groups of approximately five or six students per group, and they had about ten minutes to document their ideas on small whiteboards. When they had finished their conversations and recorded their answers, they shared their ideas as a whole class.

Having my students define the word ‘assessment’ and share their ideas about its significance proved very valuable. Contrary to our prior discussion about types of assessments, where the ideas seemed to gravitate towards summative tests and quizzes, when asked to define the word, almost all the groups agreed that assessment was a form of ongoing feedback. Many students explained that assessments helped them to know how they were doing, and what they could improve on, and also allowed the teacher to see where they were at with their learning. Every group agreed that assessment was important for helping both teachers and students to know, ‘what we know and don’t know’, and ‘where we are at’. In the students’ definitions of
assessment, none mentioned the summative piece at all, for them it was much more a process of ongoing feedback and evaluation. I believe that after our opening brainstorm about types of assessment, students were able to branch out in their thinking, and move past the concept of evaluation as solely a summative task. Photos of the students’ ideas are shown below.
As Stiggins and Chappuis (2005) explain, “from their earliest school experiences, our students draw life-shaping conclusions about themselves as learners on the basis of the information we provide to them as a result of their teachers’ classroom assessments” (p.11). When reading this article as a part of my literature review, and then hearing my students explain that they believed assessment was ongoing feedback to improve learning, I was hopeful that I had not created a class culture where assessment was something that negatively impacted my learners. Instead of students feeling judged or victimized by the assessment process, I was optimistic that my students viewed feedback and evaluations as a necessary and potentially useful, part of learning. I felt this was a promising beginning to my project.

The class conversation continued after we defined assessment. The students were more open to share their ideas in front of the whole group by this point, so we had a general discussion about their preferences regarding evaluations. I was interested to hear what types of evaluations the students enjoyed (if any), and which ones they did not. I asked the students for a show of hands who appreciated being evaluated by a teacher. About half the students raised their hands. I then asked who liked to be assessed by a peer or a friend. More students raised their hands. Finally, I inquired which of the students preferred to assess their own learning, and nearly all fifty-three students raised their hands. I was very surprised by this!

In my experience thus far, when I have asked students to self-reflect or evaluate their own work, it has been often met with a groan or roll of the eyes. Although it is something that I very frequently asked my students to do, I felt that it was often a task they were completing simply to fulfil my request, because they had to. I did not believe they saw the value in it, much less actually enjoyed doing it. I explained my surprise to the class, and asked if anyone could elaborate on why they enjoyed assessing their own work. One outgoing student explained, “I like to assess myself for
things I think I am good at, like drama or writing, but I don’t like assessing myself for things that are hard, like math”. Another student instantly put up her hand to agree. “Assessing myself for math is really hard to do, because I don’t know if I understand it or not, but things like writing, I know when I’ve got it, so I can assess myself for it.” Many other students in the class nodded their heads in agreement.

I found this extremely interesting. I had never considered before how challenging it might be for my students to assess their understanding if they were still unsure if they had actually learned anything. It also brought to light the issues of insecurity and self-confidence when evaluating learning. It seemed that even in the form of self-assessment, students were concerned that they would ‘get it wrong’ and evaluate themselves incorrectly. As Stiggins and Chappuis (2005) illustrate, supporting students to take risks, fail, and learn from their mistakes is the goal of assessment. They explain that, “students must understand that, when they try to grow academically, at first, they may not be very proficient, and that is all right. The trick is to help them know that failures hold the seeds of later success, but only if we keep going. In other words, we must stop delivering the message to students that low-level performance is always and necessarily a bad thing” (Stiggins and Chappuis, 2005, p.13). Hearing that my students did not always feel confident assessing their learning caused me to question my evaluation methods. Were the learning goals and criteria we created not clear enough? Did I not promote risk taking in the classroom? Did my students not feel safe enough to make mistakes and potentially fail at something? Earl (2003) suggests that, “teachers have the responsibility of creating environments for students to become confident, competent self-assessors who monitor their own learning” (p. 103). Was I creating this type of environment for my students? Were the types of self-assessments I had my students complete empowering and meaningful?
It was at this moment that I decided to truly engage in the ongoing spiral of action research, and slightly shift my line of questioning. I was now not only interested in self-assessment practices, but also the notion of risk taking, failure, and perseverance in learning.

**Assessment Research Projects**

For my second piece of data collection, I decided to have the students examine how the Ministry of Education defines assessment, and also have them explore how various teachers in the school conduct their evaluations of student learning. The students were required to research specific questions I gave them with regards to assessment, as well as create their own questions to investigate (see Appendix B: *What is Assessment??*). The goal of this research project was to broaden the students’ initial understandings of assessment, as well as allow me the opportunity to see where students’ interests might lie with regards to evaluations.

I asked the students to provide a definition of assessment, written in their own words. I wanted to see how they might individually define assessment after our previous group discussions, and I wished to have written data of this. I then invited the students to create at least two questions about assessment that they were interested in researching. Finally, I provided them with five inquiry questions that I had created, and asked that they choose three of these questions to answer through research. For their investigations the students were required to use reliable websites that I provided, as well as conduct interviews with other teachers in the school. Students worked individually or in partners to conduct their research and record their findings. The research questions that I provided the students were as follows:
• According to the BC government, what is quality assessment?

• According to the websites provided, and possibly other reliable websites you find, what is the purpose of assessment?

• According to the websites provided, and possibly other reliable websites you find, what are some types of authentic assessment?

• Ask a teacher in the school: “What do you think assessment is? What forms of assessment do you like to use? Why?”

• Ask a teacher in the school: “What do you think the purpose of assessment is? Why do you assess student learning? Please explain.”

I found it very interesting to review the students’ research projects. The projects provided me written data for how each student defines assessment, allowed me to see what aspects of assessment my students found the most interesting or worrisome, and gave me insight into various teachers thoughts and opinions of assessment.

Students’ Individual Definitions of Assessment

Similar to the students’ initial definitions of assessment, their individual explanations focused on assessment in terms of furthering their learning. Many students described assessment as a way of ‘showing what you know, reflecting on your learning, checking your work’, and ‘getting feedback’. Some students explained that assessment is important as it ‘helps us to set goals for ourselves’, and others said that it is a way to ‘check how much you understand’. After the initial discussion I had with the students, these answers were not surprising to me. The definitions contained assessment themes that we have discussed as a class many times over the years, and I was satisfied that for many students the notion of assessment as a way of informing learning was established in their minds. As both Kohn (1994), and Earl (2003) illustrate, it is important for educators to continually evaluate the purpose behind the types of assessments we are using.
Kohn (1994) claims that there are three main intentions of assessment: to sort students based on ability, to motivate students to work harder through the use of marks as rewards or punishments, and to provide feedback so students can learn more effectively. After reading my students’ definitions of assessment, I continue to be hopeful that this third intention of assessment as feedback aligns with my classroom practice.

**Students’ Questions about Assessment**

Reading over the students’ questions regarding assessment provided valuable data. Almost all of the students’ inquiries had to do with letter grades, FreshGrade, and the purpose or importance of assessment, and some students wondered what types of evaluations other teachers use. I did not find it surprising that the students were curious about letter grades. The year that
this particular group became grade four intermediate students, our school provided the option to cease using letter grades. Previously, once students reached grade four, they would have received summative letter grades on their report cards. As a result, my class of grade six and seven students have never received this type of evaluation, and so naturally were intrigued by the concept of letter grades. FreshGrade is also a relatively new tool for communicating student learning in our school, and these students have experienced the shift from traditional report cards to online portfolios over the past three years. Some teachers in our school continue to use summative paper learning reports, and others have opted to use FreshGrade, so it is not surprising that students might wonder how teachers feel about the two forms of communicating learning.

What was interesting to me was the fact that all the students’ questions had to do with the summative aspect of assessment. Despite the fact that many of their definitions mentioned assessment as a way of receiving feedback, reflecting on learning, or demonstrating understanding, their line of questioning veered towards final reports and evaluations. I believe this theme of inquiry speaks to the anxieties and pressures that surround assessment. As Bolton and Elmore (2013) explain, “assessment can disempower students by making them feel inadequate and generating feelings of avoidance” (p. 128). They illustrate that students often have negative associations with homework, projects, and report cards, and do not perceive them as opportunities to demonstrate learning. Bolton and Elmore (2013) emphasize that increasing assessments adds more stress on to students, especially if failure or disappointment are the feelings associated with the evaluations. Regardless of my students’ definitions of assessment, it appears that in their minds there remains a disconnect between evaluation and learning. I believe their questions reflect their potential fears or worries with regards to assessment.
Sample Student Questions:

If you were able to change the way you assess to be able to include letter grades, would you?

Do you think FreshGrade is important? Why or why not? Please explain.

Why does Surrey use FreshGrade instead of report cards?

Why do you think assessment is so important?

Teacher’s Responses

The debate over letter grades is a current hot topic in British Columbia. Some school districts have opted to do away with them in the elementary years, while others continue to mandate their use. As a result, it was very interesting to hear the opinions of the teachers from my school, as gathered through my students’ research interviews.

The majority of teachers at my school who were interviewed were of the opinion that letter grades do not paint an accurate picture of student learning. Some teachers expressed to my students that letter grades are ‘too subjective, don’t give enough detail about the learning’ or ‘don’t explain the WHY behind the mark’. These teachers are of the opinion that letter grades cause students to only focus on the final mark and not the learning, and they do not find letter grades to be meaningful or valuable. This point of view is what my students are most accustomed to hearing, as I share this stance. The students who interviewed these teachers were not shocked or surprised by these responses, and seemed to generally agree with what my colleagues were saying. Educators on this side of the assessment coin might believe, as Bower (2013) does, that, “the best kinds of information about their children’s learning might never fit on the refrigerator” (p. 158). This argument maintains that assessment cannot necessarily be measured and
diminished to a single letter grade, and that instead is something that is better observed and described (Bower, 2013).

In contrast, there were a couple of my colleagues who maintained that letter grades are useful, important, and necessary for communicating learning, especially with parents. These teachers claim that letter grades are 'more accurate, prepare students for high school, and allow parents to easily understand their children’s successes and failures'. Students who interviewed these teachers returned to my classroom astonished. Most of them had never encountered an adult, other than perhaps their parents, who supported the use of letter grades, and so it was fascinating for them to hear this viewpoint.
As a whole class the students discussed and shared their findings from their research and interviews, and I believe it was valuable for them to hear the opposing perspectives and arguments for and against letter grades.

**Ongoing ‘Oops!’ Board and Journals**

The idea to create an ‘Oops!’ board to celebrate mistakes and failures, came from the article, “Formative Assessment in the Visual Arts” by Andrade, Hefferen, and Palma (2014). As I mentioned previously in my literature review, the article investigates a variety of self-assessment techniques, as used by visual arts teachers. I found the notion of a bulletin board that showcases the learning process of trial and error and making mistakes to be inspiring, and decided to try something similar in my own classroom.

In my experience, grade six and seven students are often insecure, self-conscious, and painfully aware of what others may think of them. Former Russian psychologist and developmental theorist Lev Vygotsky (1986), suggests that there are three critical periods in children’s lives where they undergo considerable developmental changes; these are around the
ages of three, seven, and early adolescence. He describes these transitions as ‘crises’, and claims the developmental upheaval that occurs for children during these critical periods are extremely profound. During the crisis of adolescence, Vygotsky explains that youth begin to understand the notion of self-reflection, and start to question how they themselves fit into the larger world system (Mahn, 2003). He also states that adolescents are often caught between the need to create a unique individual identity, and the desire to fit in and belong (Mahn, 2003). It was my hope that by allowing my students a space to showcase their failures, they might recognize how common it is to make mistakes.

Rather than simply focusing on the visual arts, I decided to expand it to all avenues of classroom learning. I wondered, could we as a class make our mistakes public, reflect and improve upon them, and make revisions? Would my students be willing to focus on the process of learning rather than the final product? And could this help alleviate some of the pressures students felt with regards to final assessments? As Andrade, Hefferen, and Palma (2014) explain, “artists often stop to think and write notes about what didn't work in order to avoid repeating mistakes and to enable them to use a happy accident” (p. 39). My hope was that I would be able to develop this idea to include other subjects, so that my students could use their ‘happy accidents’ in all aspects of their education to further their learning.

After school one day I began by creating two identical bulletin boards, one in my classroom, and one across the hall in my teaching partner’s room. I titled the board ‘Oops!’ in large, bright letters, and flanked the title with two smaller signs that read:
When the students arrived the following morning, they were curious about the new bulletin board, and I was excited to explain it to them. I chose to begin by sharing with the students some very personal mistakes and failures from my own life, in the hopes that this would ease some of the discomfort that the students might feel when asked to reflect on their own errors. I gathered the students, and told them two stories. The first was about failing my driving test at the age of twenty-seven, and the second was about receiving a rejection letter for a Masters program at UBC. I chose to share these two short anecdotes with my students as both were times in my life when I had felt like a complete failure. I did not feel uncomfortable or uneasy sharing these personal moments with the class. I have built a very trusting, and mutually respectful relationship with these children, and over the past three or four years have recounted many narratives from my life. I explained how anxious I had felt both when taking my driving test, and when awaiting to hear from UBC, and how devastated I had been when the results were not favourable. I told them in detail how I had gotten into bed and cried, vowed never to drive again, and decided to give up pursuing graduate studies as I felt I just wasn’t good enough. While I spoke, every single one of my students listened intently. Their expressions were fascinated, surprised, and most of all, supportive. I could tell that each of my students could relate to the feelings that I was describing. Each of them, at one time or another, had experienced the

Please Post:
-Mistakes
-Things that did not go as planned
-Stuff you did not get ‘right’ the first time!

This is a place to CELEBRATE our mistakes, errors, and failures!
devastation of failure or rejection. I hoped that my stories might help validate these feelings for them. I then described how I had not, in fact, given up on driving or graduate studies, that I had learned from my mistakes, and persevered. The lesson I intended for my students to glean from these stories was that learning is not linear, and often involves making mistakes, reflecting, re-evaluating, and trying again.

I then explained the inspiration behind the ‘Oops!’ board, and how I was hoping we as a class could use the space. Some students were eager to share their own embarrassing failures with the class, so we ended the lesson by hearing their stories. I posted on the bulletin board my rejection letter for the students to read, a journal about failing my driving test, and a small reflection of how I felt and what I learned from these experiences. I also displayed a piece of artwork that I was not proud of, and included a reflection with that as well.

I had hoped that seeing my mistakes and failures celebrated on the ‘Oops!’ board would be motivation enough for my students to post their own, however I was mistaken. The fear of judgement from their peers, or of being the first student to put something on the board was too great, and so despite my encouragement, the bulletin board remained empty, save for my posts and reflections. A colleague made the suggestion of
having each student complete an ‘Oops Journal’ to get the ball rolling. I decided that giving them a specific time to write and reflect upon a significant mistake or failure would be beneficial, and so assigned the journal writing activity. For the assignment I asked the students to recount a time when they had failed or made a serious mistake. I requested that they share a moment that was significant to them, and that they include how the event made them feel. I assured them that if the stories were too personal or private, no one but myself would read them, and I did not make it mandatory that they post their finished journals. Many students seemed relieved to hear this, and all children from the two classes completed the journal assignment.

I found it very interesting to read the students’ ‘Oops! Journals’. Many of the students recounted moments when they had let other people down, their parents, team members, or various teachers. Almost every story communicated feelings of anxiety, embarrassment, and disappointment. Some of the journal entries described sporting events or competitions when students had not done their best, however most of the stories told of moments at school when students had been unsuccessful on some form of assessment. What was most intriguing for me was that almost all the narratives described moments where other people had made the students feel unsuccessful or incompetent, and the same was true for my own personal ‘Oops!’ moments. Having someone else judge me, tell me that I was not good enough, was devastating. When we give our students negative feedback, constructive criticism, or low grades, we affect their self worth. Assessment should motivate low
performing students and increase their confidence, not cause them to give up on themselves as learners (Stiggins, Chappuis, 2005). Reading the journal entries supported my belief that students are often victims of assessment practices. As Stiggins and Chappuis (2005) explain, “the trick is to help them [students] know that failures hold the seeds of later success, but only if we keep going. In other words, we must stop delivering the message to students that low-level performance is always and necessarily a bad thing” (p.13). I hoped that if we as a class began to recognize these mistakes, and openly share our failure narratives, we might begin to create a class culture where errors were welcomed as learning opportunities. This was the goal of the ‘Oops!’ bulletin board.

Once students had completed their journal entries, many were eager to post these on the bulletin board. After a few brave souls put up their writing, many more students followed suit. By the end of the week, our ‘Oops!’ board was filled with tales of mistakes and failures. Various pieces of artwork joined the journals on the bulletin board, and students began writing mini reflections to go with their artifacts.

This bulletin board is something that I am going to continue in my classroom until the end of the year. One month was not enough time to notice any meaningful change in attitudes or feelings towards failure. I did, however, observe that students were very eager to read the narratives posted on the board, and discuss each other’s
mistakes. I believe sharing these stories helped the students to empathize with one another, and possibly commiserate over their failures. Students in my class are now more willing to admit when they have made an error, and it is not uncommon to hear someone declare, “well, that was an oops moment!” As students continue to post and engage with the ‘Oops!’ board, it is my hope that they will become increasingly comfortable with the notion of learning from their mistakes.

Student Surveys

Now that I had collected information regarding my students’ definitions of assessment, I was curious to see how they truly felt about it. I decided to conduct a survey in order to quickly gather the opinions of a large number of students (See Appendix C: Assessment Survey for Students).
The data below highlights some results from this survey. I have only included data from the survey that I found to be the most relevant or interesting to me for this research project, based on the themes of formative assessment and student self-evaluation. I created this survey early on in my action research journey, when I was focusing on student ownership with regards to their learning. As my research questions developed and progressed, so too did my interests. The data I chose to include in this report reflects this. The following data is from the forty-five students surveyed.

Data from Student Surveys

1. *Students’ feelings about various types of assessments.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dislike/Strongly Dislike</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Like/Strongly Like</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews or Conferences with a Teacher</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Portfolios</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Self-Reflections</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. *Students’ feelings regarding how useful they find various forms of marks, grading, or feedback.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not Helpful</th>
<th>Kind of Helpful</th>
<th>Helpful/Very Helpful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written Comments</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Scales</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Evaluations</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. **Students’ feelings and opinions about the following assessment statements.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Disagree/Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree/Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am able to honestly evaluate my own work</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like thinking about what I am proud of in my learning, and setting goals for my learning</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting good grades or good marks motivates me to learn more and try harder at school</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. **Students’ feelings regarding how useful they find various methods of self-assessment.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not Helpful</th>
<th>Kind of Helpful</th>
<th>Helpful/Very Helpful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class generated rubrics</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning goals created by themselves</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written reflections or journals</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. **What is your favourite way to share your learning?**

Sample Responses:

- *One of my favourite ways to share my learning is to make a poster, draw pictures, and write small descriptions to share the information. My second favourite way of sharing my learning is through a power-point, because I think it helps me practice speaking in front of the class.*

- *FreshGrade because your teachers and parents can see where I’m at in my learning and skills.*

- *My favourite way to share my learning is in small groups about 3-5, I also like to share my learning in writing.*

- *I like to make videos about my learning because it shows how I can do and it shows me telling you what it’s about.*
• Projects because it’s way more easier for me to show what I have learned.

• Nothing.

6. **What would be your ideal way to receive feedback about your learning?**

Sample Responses:

• I think that for me, receiving feedback is much more helpful when I receive it on FreshGrade. I think it’s better than having a teacher tell you to your face because I would find it awkward and uncomfortable.

• Receiving comments and tips on how I can improve and get better in that skill.

• My ideal way to receive feedback about my learning is in written reports from the teacher, or by using FreshGrade.

• Probably to receive it in comments and rubrics because it shows where I can improve and what I am doing really well.

• I find written comments most helpful because they are specific for one person. Rubrics, you have to choose what’s on the page. Online portfolios like FreshGrade are also useful, because you can read the feedback in comments and it is in real time.

• In groups because I can get lots of people’s feedback.

• Well my ideal way to receive feedback is just comments. I understand way more better when it’s straightforward.

**Analysis of Survey Data**

When reviewing the data I collected through these surveys, there were a few things that really caught my attention. Overall, it appeared that the students who are typically lower academic achievers dislike most forms of assessments, and do not find much feedback to be beneficial. Conversely, higher academic achievers seem to be neutral towards, or enjoy, most evaluations and forms of feedback. It can be very difficult to change a students’ opinion of assessment, especially if they have felt victimized by low marks or unfavourable evaluations in the past. As Stiggins and Chappuis (2005) illustrate, “the essential school improvement question from
an assessment point of view is this: Are we skilled enough to use classroom assessment to either (1) keep all learners from losing hope to begin with, or (2) rebuild that hope once it has been destroyed?” (p.12). It appeared to me when reviewing this data that some students in my class had most certainly fallen victim to assessment, and had possibly lost hope in themselves as learners. Stiggins and Chappuis (2005) claim that, “with increased confidence comes the belief that learning is possible” (p.12). Would my focus on self-assessment practices be enough to re-build these students’ faith in themselves, and allow them to trust in the process of learning again?

In question number one, regarding students feelings towards certain types of assessments, I was amazed to see how few students enjoyed completing Student Portfolios. My students document much of their learning using an online portfolio tool called FreshGrade, and the majority of my class often tell me how much they enjoy doing this! I am quite enthusiastic about the use of FreshGrade to document learning, so it is possible that my students are pretending to enjoy it to spare my feelings. It also occurred to me that perhaps my students did not understand the correlation between the terms FreshGrade, and Student Portfolio. It is very possible that in their minds, the two are not related, and so when asked to share their feelings about Student Portfolios they were thinking of something completely different. Unfortunately, had I been more specific about what type of portfolio I actually meant, I could have avoided this confusion, and gathered more accurate data.

For question number two regarding how useful the students found various forms of evaluations, I decided to include only Written Comments, Performance Scales, and Self-Evaluations in my data analysis, as these are the three most common forms of feedback that I use in my classroom. I was thus pleased to find that most students considered these three types of evaluations to be useful. It was not surprising to me that the majority of students find written
feedback to be very beneficial. I often take great time writing individual feedback for my students, and I like to believe these comments are thoughtful, informative, and specific. I found it interesting that more students did not find self-evaluations to be helpful, especially after our initial class discussion, where the majority of students had raised their hand to show their preference for self-assessments.

I found the answers to question number three to be the most interesting. I did not find it surprising that the majority of students felt that they could honestly evaluate their own work. Self-reflections are something we do often in class, and the students have had a great deal of practice evaluating their own learning. I did, however, find it noteworthy to discover that so many students found good marks to be motivating. Kohn (1994) explains that if grades or marks are used as extrinsic motivators, they may actually have the opposite effect, and discourage students from taking risks or trying their best. I wondered if this was true for my class. If I were to only provide informative feedback with no final mark, as Bower (2013) had in his study, what might the outcome be? Would students still believe that grades or performance scales were such a great motivating factor to their learning? Or might they start to see the value of trial and error, and ongoing feedback that informs learning?

I decided to include Rubrics, Learning Goals, and Written Reflections for number four as these are the forms of self-assessments that the students complete most often in my classroom. Overall, the majority of my students appear to believe that self-assessment is useful to their learning. While it remains unclear just how confident my students are in assessing their learning, or how much they enjoy the process, they do seem to recognize the benefits of reflecting and evaluating their understanding. As Earl (2003) maintains, “teachers have the responsibility of creating environments for students to become confident, competent self-assessors who monitor
their own learning” (p. 103). When reviewing the data I collected through this survey, I felt optimistic that I was empowering my students to become independent, self-reflective learners.

**Student Focus Group**

I decided to hold a focus group with some of my students for my final method of collecting data. I was interested to hear about the pressures students felt around assessment, and I wanted to facilitate a more in-depth discussion about the development of our classroom ‘Oops!’ board. I knew that many of my students would be eager and willing to participate in the focus group, as they love sharing their opinions and would find it exciting. Rather than having them volunteer, I chose to select some students who had posted something on the ‘Oops!’ board, and some who had not. I also chose both higher achieving students who had mentioned on their surveys that they enjoyed most forms of assessment, as well as the lower achieving students who did not. I wanted to be sure to include a range of opinions and attitudes towards learning and assessment in my focus group. Overall I had seven students participate, both boys and girls from grade six and seven.

For the purpose of this research report I assume that the students I chose somewhat represent the greater population of the two classes participating in the project. I also assume that the students were able to answer truthfully, regardless of the obvious student/teacher power dichotomy. I was not worried that my students would be dishonest or unable to answer frankly; as I mentioned previously I have a very trusting relationship with them, and have worked hard to create a classroom culture where everyone’s ideas and opinions are valued. A concern I did have was that my students might try to preserve my feelings in some way, and not answer candidly if
they perceived their answers might disappoint me. I explained this to my students, and hoped that they would feel free to share their opinions openly during the discussion.

Overall, I found this focus group produced the most beneficial and enlightening data. It was extremely useful to hear the students’ opinions on taking risks and sharing mistakes, and their perspective on the pressures of assessment really surprised me. An outline of the questions I asked can be found at the end of this report (see Appendix D: Focus Group Questions). The focus group discussion took place over one thirty minute lunch period.

I began by asking the students about the class ‘Oops’ board, and why some had chosen to post journals and artifacts, while others had not. The general consensus was that sharing mistakes is a very personal and embarrassing thing to do, and not everyone was comfortable displaying these for the class to see. One student remarked that had it been mandatory for everyone to post an ‘Oops’ moment, this would have made it less uncomfortable, as they would have felt “all in it together”. Those students who did share a mistake or failure with the class expressed that they liked doing so, and that it “felt good to let it out”. As one girl explained, having the ‘Oops’ board, “means that people don’t make a huge deal out of mistakes anymore, and it makes it easier to make mistakes”. The whole notion of displaying mistakes and failures in the classroom is still novel, and it will be interesting to see how the bulletin board develops and changes in the coming months. Will the same students continue to feel too embarrassed to share their mistakes, or will viewing others’ stories and artifacts boost their confidence?

After discussing the ‘Oops’ board with the group, I was interested to hear their opinions regarding assessment. More specifically, I wanted to know how they felt when being evaluated by a teacher, and how this compared to self-assessing their own learning. Their responses were very informative, and opened my eyes to aspects of my assessment practice that I hadn’t really
considered before. All seven students agreed that they found assignments or activities to be more manageable and less stressful if they knew a teacher was not going to be assessing them. One boy declared, “if you tell me I am going to be assessed on something it makes me more nervous”.

I was interested in hearing more about this, and so asked them what part of being assessed by a teacher was so stressful. Their responses were very interesting. One girl explained that she was afraid of “messing up”, and another boy expanded on this, stating that his main concern was disappointing me! All the students agreed with this, and jumped into the conversation declaring that the worst part of being evaluated was the fear of letting down the teacher. One student explained, "your teachers know where you are at and what you can do, so if you don’t do that you might be letting the teacher down because they know what you are capable of". This really surprised me. Despite my efforts over the years to ensure that my evaluation practices have been informative and transparent, my students still feel judged by the process of assessment. As Bolton and Elmore (2013) explain, “to understand the impact of assessment, it is important to realize that the assessment policies and practices of a teacher define and enforce the power relationship between teacher and students... if one is to truly empower students, it is important to critically consider one’s assessment policies and practices” (p.131). It appeared that I needed to reconsider my own approach to assessment. Perhaps the power relationship between my students and me was not as balanced as I had initially believed.

It was also very valuable to hear the students’ opinions regarding self-assessment. They all agreed that they did not feel nearly as much pressure when asked to evaluate their own learning. One girl stated that, “I like self-assessing because then I am not worried about the mark that I will get, so I can just try to the best of my ability, and I can know how I did inside so then it is not as scary”. Another boy expanded on this, claiming, “I like self-assessing more, because when I assess
myself, the teacher can see where I am and either agree with me or I can talk to her about it. I like self-assessing so I know where I am [in my learning].” Kohn (1998) and Bower (2013) maintain that assessment should always involve the kids, and it would appear that my students agree with them!

The final aspect of this focus group discussion that was of most interest to me was in regards to formative feedback. I often provide written and oral feedback for my students, and the data I collected on the surveys confirmed that most students found this to be beneficial. As I touched upon in my opening vignette, something I struggle with in my practice is assisting my students in not only reading the constructive feedback I provide them, but actually using it to further their learning. As Volante and Becket (2011) describe in their research, “teachers in this study struggled with finding creative ways to make their students fully use their formative feedback” (p. 246). I was interested to hear how my students felt about receiving and applying feedback. Most students in the focus group agreed that having the opportunity to use feedback to re-do an assignment lessened some of the pressures of being evaluated. One girl explained that, “getting a second chance or the opportunity to re-do something makes it so much better because we have lots of chances to get better and be better, not just one time and that’s it”.

This caused me to reflect on my own practice. How often did I genuinely allow the time and space for my students to apply the feedback I gave them on activities or assignments? I strongly believe that students should be given multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning, and should be provided ample time to practice, make mistakes, and try again. In reality however, we as teachers often run out of time, and move on to the next skill or topic before all students have had the opportunity to truly learn the material. The following boy’s statement epitomizes this: “time is an issue when getting assessed for things, because it makes us feel under
pressure when we don’t have enough time to do things”. Not only does rushing through the subject matter mean our students may not fully comprehend what we are teaching, it also increases the stress and pressure they feel when they know they will be assessed on their learning.

Conclusions and Reflections

As I review and reflect upon the data I have collected over the course of this project, one thing seems especially clear; involving kids in the process of assessment is crucial. Three key aspects of my research seem particularly significant:

1) We as educators should invite our students to be directors, or at very least partners, in the assessment process.

2) Students regularly feel the pressures of assessment. Providing formative feedback, and allowing them the space to evaluate their own learning may help to lessen this strain.

3) It is important to support our students to take risks, fail, and learn from these mistakes. If students are constantly feeling judged and evaluated by us as teachers, they may never take the risks necessary to further their learning.

This project has been just the beginning of my exploration into assessment. It has motivated me to reflect upon my practice as an educator, and to truly examine and consider my methods of assessment. I do not claim to have answered any questions about self-assessment or student learning, and my research has most definitely generated new questions I wish to explore. Considering evaluation practices, and gathering evidence from my students regarding their opinions and feelings towards assessment, have been invaluable for my own practice as an
educator. I wish to continue to investigate ways that assessment can empower students as learners, and explore new ways of evaluating that informs and extends student learning.

When embarking upon this action research journey, it was never my expectation that I would reach any forgone conclusions about assessment, or that my inquiry would produce tangible answers to my spiral of questions. Rather, it was my intention to examine and reflect upon my own evaluation methods and practices, and gain insight into my students’ feelings and opinions regarding assessment. For me, this project has been a small piece of the much larger puzzle. As an educator I plan to continue exploring the themes of formative assessment, self-evaluation, risk taking, and reporting, and continue reflecting on how they impact student learning. As Bower (2013) emphasizes, “grading gets assessment wrong because assessment is not a spreadsheet – it is a conversation” (p. 167). I plan to continue this conversation with my students and colleagues, continually questioning and reflecting on my assessment practices.
Closing Metaphor of Assessment and Learning...

*Learning is a complicated road map.*

We as teachers are aware of the final destination of our lessons - a learning goal or specific skill we wish our students to grasp for example – however there are countless routes that can lead our students there. Some paths may be faster, more direct, or cheaper on gas. Others may be convoluted, with seemingly unnecessary twists and turns, but possibly allow for a view of the scenery along the way. Our students will face obstacles on their journeys, and it is our job as educators to assist them in reaching their final destination. Not all will choose the same route, and they will not all arrive at the same time. Some may get lost and never reach our chosen location at all. We may have had a certain course laid out, but who are we as educators to judge how a student learns an objective? We might have selected a different route, but ultimately it is not up to us to choose the best path for our students to take. Instead we should focus on empowering our students to drive the bus on their own learning journeys, and *sit beside them* while they evaluate for themselves if the routes they choose are the most useful or appropriate.
References


Appendices

Appendix A: Parental Consent Form

February 8, 2017

Dear Parents and/or Caregivers of Divisions 2 & 4,

I am currently working on my Master of Education in Curriculum Theory and Development through Simon Fraser University. This program enables me as an educator to reflect upon my practice and its impact on my teaching, as well as on my students’ learning, with the intention of developing my own best practices. As part of my studies I have developed an inquiry project to examine how various assessment practices promote student growth and learning. I anticipate that my inquiry will provide me with insights that will help me develop meaningful ways for my students to assess their own learning. It will also help me to reflect on my practice as a professional and improve my teaching.

My inquiry will be primarily based on my own observations and reflections on my work as a teacher. Over the course of the next two months I will also collect student work samples, surveys, reflections, videos, and photographs to inform my understanding of my practice. All elements of my inquiry will take place within the context of my normal instruction and practice.

This letter of informed consent is part of my ethical responsibilities as a teacher-inquirer. I am asking your permission to potentially use your child’s work samples, surveys, focus group/interview responses, and reflections, to present to members of my graduate cohort and my instructors to demonstrate my own learning. As part of my responsibility as an educator, professionalism around issues of confidentiality will be ensured. Consistent with the ethical protocols of teacher inquiry, if your child is mentioned in the presentation of my work, an alias (pseudonym) will be used at all times to respect and protect his/her privacy. I would like to reassure you that regardless of my inquiry, my ethical best practices as a teacher will remain the same.

This inquiry process is not intended to assess, place, or evaluate your child in any way, but will serve to strengthen my teaching practice. Regardless of your decision, the integrity of the relationship I have with your child will not be affected, and you can withdraw your consent at anytime.

If you have any questions or concerns please don’t hesitate to contact me via email at albach_a@surreyschools.ca, or via phone at (604) 585-9547. If you agree to give your permission, please sign below and return the signed form with your child no later than Tuesday, February 14th 2017.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,

Ms. Ashleigh Albach
Grade 6/7 Fine Arts Teacher
David Brankin Elementary

___________________________________________
I, _________________________________ give permission for my child, _________________________________ to be included in Ms. Ashleigh Albach’s inquiry. I also agree to the collection and potential use of work samples, surveys, focus group/interview responses, and reflections as described above.

Parent/guardian Signature: ___________________________ Printed Name: ___________________________

Date: ___________________________
Appendix B: What is Assessment???

What is Assessment???

You all know what assessment is. Or at least you think you do! You have written tests, done self-reflections, highlighted rubrics, and received feedback. You know the meaning of Not Met Meeting or Exceeding Expectations.

But what really is the point of assessment? What is it for? Why do teachers need to assess students? Why do you assess yourselves?

This assignment asks you to take a close look at what assessment really is, and what it is for (according to adults). You will look at the BC Ministry of Education website to see what the government has to say about assessment, as well as talk to some teachers in your life to find out what they think assessment is. You will record your questions, research, and findings below.

PART 1: OPINIONS AND INQUIRY

In your own words, write a definition for assessment below. Think about WHAT it is, and WHY it is important (or why it should not be important). There are no wrong answers here, just your ideas and opinions!

Now come up with at least 2 questions that you could look research about assessment. You will try to answer these by talking to other teachers, and conducting research online. You should not be able to answer these questions with ‘Yes’ or ‘No’.

1. __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

2. __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

PART 2: RESEARCH

Now you will do some research into assessment. You will try to answer your own two inquiry questions, as well as choosing at least 3 of the questions listed below to answer. Use the websites listed below, as well as informal discussions with other teachers and staff in the school, to do your research. If you use information not found in the websites I provided, make sure that the sources are reliable! Record your research in your own words, in the table on the next page. Point form is fine. Include as much detail as you can, minimum 3-5 points per question.

Choose 3 of these questions to complete. Be sure to choose both questions that involve research from websites, and that involve interviewing a teacher at the school.
• According to the BC government, what is quality assessment? Write down your answers in your own words.

• According to the websites provided, and possibly other reliable websites you find, what is the purpose of assessment? Write down your answers in your own words.

• According to the websites provided, and possibly other reliable websites you find, what are some types of authentic assessment?

• Ask a teacher in the school: “What do you think assessment is? What forms of assessment do you like to use? Why?”

• Ask a teacher in the school: “What do you think the purpose of assessment is? Why do you assess student learning? Please explain.”

Reliable websites to use for your research:

https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/assessment-info

https://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/classroom_assessment/

https://www.edutopia.org/assessment-guide-importance

https://www.edutopia.org/assessment-guide-description

### Appendix C: Assessment Survey for Students

**Assessment Survey for Students**

Please answer the following questions as honestly and carefully as you can. Everything you say will be kept private.

*If you wish to remain anonymous, feel free to leave 'PART A' of this survey blank.*

**PART A:**

Name: ___________________________  
School: ___________________________

Teacher’s Name: ___________________  
Grade: _____________________________

Gender: ___________________________

**PART B:**

1. **Please consider the following types of assessments.** Check off the appropriate column based on *how you feel* about the types of assessments. *Think about which ones you enjoy doing, or which ones you really do not enjoy.* Be honest!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Type</th>
<th>Strongly Dislike</th>
<th>Dislike</th>
<th>Neutral (don’t like or dislike)</th>
<th>Like</th>
<th>Strongly Like</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tests/Quizzes</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews or Conferences with a Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral Presentations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group Projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual Projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Portfolios</td>
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<tr>
<td>Written Reports</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student self-reflections</td>
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<tr>
<td>Videos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other, please specify:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. **Please consider the following ways you receive marks or feedback.** *Which ones do you think help you to learn or improve? Are there any that are not helpful?* Check off the appropriate column based on your opinions. If you do not receive this type of assessment from your teacher, check off ‘I don’t know’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback Type</th>
<th>Not Helpful</th>
<th>Kind of Helpful</th>
<th>Helpful</th>
<th>Very Helpful</th>
<th>I don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Letter Grades</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Written Comments from the Teacher</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rubrics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number Scores (for example 8/10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performance Scales (Not Yet Meeting, Approaching, Meeting Expectations)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conferences with the Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Posts and Comments on FreshGrade</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer-evaluations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-evaluations (assessing myself)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other, please specify:</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. To what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Consider your feelings and opinions when answering the questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is important for me to assess my own learning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Creating criteria together with the class and the teacher is important.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am able to honestly evaluate my own work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I like thinking about what I am proud of in my learning, and setting goals for my learning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Getting good grades or good marks motivates me to learn more and try harder at school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is important that my teacher marks everything I do.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I usually agree with my teacher's feedback or the marks she gives me.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

4. Please rate the following methods of self-assessment.
   In your opinion, how useful do you find the following methods of self-assessment in helping you to learn more?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method of STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT</th>
<th>Not Very Useful</th>
<th>Somewhat Useful</th>
<th>Useful</th>
<th>Very Useful</th>
<th>I do not use this method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using a rubric created together as a class to assess my own learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using checklists to evaluate my learning</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Answering questions about what I have learned and what I still need to learn more about</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating learning goals for myself to drive their learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing reflections or journals about my learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussing my struggles, successes, and learning with my peers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creating videos to reflect on my learning</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
5. In your opinion, what is the purpose of assessment?

6. What is your favourite way to share your learning? Please explain.

7. What would be your ideal way to receive feedback about your learning? Please explain.

8. Is there anything else you wish to add about assessment?

9. Would you be willing to participate in a small focus group (4-6 students) and Ms. Albach to answer some questions about assessment?

   YES   
   NO

10. Would you be willing to participate in a one-one interview with Ms. Albach to answer some questions about assessment?

    YES   
    NO

Thank you for participating in my Survey about Assessment. Please note all answers will be kept confidential and the information gathered here will only be used to further my own inquiry and learning about assessment. If I choose to use any of the information gathered in my final report, your privacy will remain protected. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to ask me!

Thank you again for your participation and support.

Ms. Albach
**Appendix D: Focus Group Questions**

**Focus Group Questions:**

1. Some of you chose to post things on the ‘Oops’ board, some of you did not. Can you explain why you did or did not?

2. How did it feel posting a failure or something you were not proud of for the class to see?

3. How do you feel about this process of celebrating mistakes and failures? Do you like talking about it?

4. Do you think you are more willing to take risks in learning if you are not going to be assessed by a teacher?

5. Does it make you feel differently if I tell you that I am assessing something or not assessing something??

6. Do you usually agree with how I assess your learning? Are my assessments often different than your own?