

Softening the Edges of Reporting

How can we soften the edges of reporting to families? Here are a few things to consider.

Work on the Relationship

A report card and subsequent conference can seem very impersonal when they are with people we don't know very well. That being said, some of us teach hundreds of students a year, and developing a relationship with each student and family can seem next to impossible. Developing relationships amid the demands of a busy classroom and teaching schedule can seem daunting. This is where formal processes (conferences, writing workshops, reflection circles, and portfolios that have interaction built in, and so on) that support self-assessment, reflection, and peer engagement are so important. In addition, having a reporting system that invites students to communicate their own learning stories through portfolios and work samples supports the development of these essential relationships. Classrooms that utilize social media platforms and digital portfolios find connecting with families easier and more manageable. As an educator, holding all the responsibility for developing a school-family relationship is exhausting and unnecessary. Sharing this responsibility with students and parents makes our work an exercise in partnership. Consistent practices create clarity and community with much less effort than systems that confuse and mask the work we do together. Furthermore, when an entire school works together to facilitate learning goal-based experiences and authentic and aligned assessment practices, we increase clarity exponentially and build true school-home partnerships (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016).

Embed Reporting Throughout the Learning Cycle

Learning does not end with reporting. Constructing ways to embed reporting in the learning cycle supports the understanding that reporting reflects learning at a particular time and place; as conditions and contexts change, learning continues to develop and allows us to illustrate growth. Supporting intellectual activity and future opportunities requires a continual, constructive conversation about the learning goals and how they address broader skills and competencies. Because the goals rest within a larger context of lifelong learning for students, the need for dialogue, reflection, and goal setting cannot be ignored.

Use Portfolios as a Catalyst for Reflection

Portfolios can serve the dual purposes of documenting learning and analyzing growth. This positions them to be useful to students, teachers, and families. Jeffry Overlie (2009) explains, "Teachers need to set aside time for students to do a

periodic portfolio review and reflect on specific probing questions pertaining to their understanding” (p. 190). This review moves a portfolio from a collection of *stuff kids have done* to a springboard for future learning experiences.

We must ensure portfolios serve a meaningful purpose for students and teachers. We can invite students to choose an item of pride—an item that challenges them and that demonstrates growth. Portfolios indicate a hard edge to assessment when we spend hours posting and organizing student work to share. This hard edge can become softened when we invite students into the process, sharing the ownership for portfolio creation. We can also invite our learners to curate their portfolios based on what we intend to do with them (select examples of strong learning if we are celebrating, or select a sample that is not complete if we are encouraging reflection and revision, for example). This way, we are spending our time wisely and meaningfully. Regardless of the learner’s age, he or she should be invited to use the process as part of learning. Portfolios are more than a collection of artifacts. When used to their full potential, portfolios invite deep reflection that is difficult to do with day-to-day work.

Stay Curious

We would be hard pressed to find the perfect assessment and reporting system for every teacher and student in every context. Our environments change, our students have unique needs, and our own knowledge and skill develop over time. One of the most important ways to soften the edge of reporting is to allow ourselves the time and space to try new things and adjust them when they don’t work. When a practice doesn’t quite align with our beliefs, we need to feel comfortable to explore it further, discuss it with our colleagues, and sort out how to make it better. Accepting a grading program without understanding how it generates a grade, or sharing learning only at reporting periods because it is what everyone else does, can be uncomfortable when these practices don’t align with our beliefs about assessment and the whole student. Teacher professionalism depends on our ability to make these kinds of decisions for ourselves and our students. We have to exercise the right to stay curious, ask questions, and seek more information.

References

- DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., Many, T. W., & Mattos, M. (2016). *Learning by doing: A handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work* (3rd ed.). Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Overlie, J. (2009). Creating confident, capable learners. In T. R. Guskey (Ed.), *The teacher as assessment leader* (pp. 181–201). Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.