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Growing Independence: Making Practice Collaborative, Flexible, and Meaningful

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Abstract

The concept of practice, from a middle school student's perspective, is mundane, redundant, perhaps yawn-inducing. This essay explains a first-hand account of an educator moving to a proficiency-based learning format and discovering how student proficiency does not often improve without engaging and flexible practice opportunities. Using middle level concepts and brain-based research, changes in the educator's practice came to accommodate the needs of students and take away the stigma of practice as being boring or repetitive. The essay includes examples of learning targets, in-class activities, and curriculum structures.

“Practice” is one of the most loathed words to be uttered in a middle school. An educator who dares mention practice is to be met with a cacophony of moans, groans, or even shrieks - all from sneering students, aghast at what, in their minds, will certainly be a boring, repetitive activity. This should not be surprising. An inflexible, single-track pathway to success formed by repetition, without creativity or collaboration? This violates teaching practice informed by adolescent brain-based research. Students need to be “active participants in their own learning” (Armstrong, 2016, p. 40). Anything less and you might as well plop a blank page in front of a student and command that he or she copy a vocabulary list, words and definitions, over and over because - ahem - “practice makes perfect.”

Change for the Better

Moving to a proficiency-based assessment system required fundamental change to my pedagogy. In the past I had worked to create dynamic and differentiated assessment strategies based on content-knowledge and memorization. It seemed sensible. Practical, even. I was encouraging my students to become masters of content retention. In reality, however, this was outdated and flawed. It is the 21st century. Content is ubiquitous. A modern educator's calling lies in supporting student growth toward problem-solving, innovation, and creation; to “shift the classroom balance from teacher-directed to student-centered learning” (Daniels, Hyde, & Zemelman, 1998, p. 184). Proficiency-based assessment helped to shape my thinking about how to make my output as an educator meaningful. My work has become

about crafting opportunities for students to target and improve particular skills, with content as the vehicle driving this progress.

Over the past three years my learning outcomes, assessment strategies, and opportunities for student creativity have evolved. Numerical grades have disappeared and proficiency-based reports, with clear and articulated learning targets, have become the new mode of communicating student growth. Quickly, however, I found gaps in the process. Proficiency-based assessment structures can be put in place with crystal-clear expectations for skill development. However, middle level students do not automatically intake, process, and then conceive pathways for improvement.

I offer here an example: An educator provides a beautifully articulated learning target for a certain skill. The assessment expectations are communicated clearly. Resources are provided. Work time is scheduled. Class content is reviewed. There are even options for students to be creative with their assessment (a project, say). In short, the pathway for student success is laid out. Then the educator simply says, “okay - demonstrate your proficiency.” The results? Middling, stagnant performance from the majority of students. Why? Because they never had the opportunity to practice and develop the skill. There was no teacher-led demonstration, nor large or small group collaboration to support student growth.

It sounds like the most obvious rule in the world, but improvement does not come without practice. With practice comes failure. My own improvement with proficiency-based assessment

came from failing. And I did so by making precisely the type of mistake that was described above.

Hiding in Plain Sight

My “aha” moment came from a conversation with a mentor. Converting to proficiency-based assessment coincided with finding a new job in a new school district. While starting my new position, I would participate in weekly chats or observations with my in-school mentor Meg. We would discuss a range of topics regarding our educational philosophy, pedagogy and reflections. One of these afternoon chats came toward the end of my first year of embracing proficiency-based assessment. We were discussing improving student proficiency. I expressed my struggles with feeling like I had been putting support systems in place, but had not been finding measurable student growth. Meg quickly scribbled a structure for a practice method that she recalled:

I (teacher-led) → **We** (as a group) → **You** (as partners) → **You** (independent)

I made a copy, our meeting concluded, and I let the concept simmer. I thought about my curriculum as a Social Studies teacher. I thought about the skills at the core of my curriculum. I thought about the importance of guiding students in practicing skills. I started to envision how, if crafted properly, the I/We/You/You method would become a simple pathway for student growth. Lightbulb. It all made sense. How could I expect students to develop skills without focusing instructional time to do so? This was a revelation; particularly because it all seemed so obvious. The answer was hiding in plain sight.

Trial and Error

Things did not start perfectly. Implementing demonstrations, group-based practice, then partnered activities felt, at times, strained or forced. Student feedback (more like unvarnished criticism – you have got to love the honesty of middle schoolers) conveyed that these activities felt either like hand-holding or exercise routines. What skills were we practicing? Where was the meaning? Where was the exploration? In short, the “new system” did not have rave reviews. In fact, it was tanking.

Structured practice activities will never be effective for students if they feel stiff or tedious. Rather, adolescent brains need to be engaged with crafting and creating. At the middle level, this requires educators to “provide bounded freedom” (Crowell & Reid-Marr, 2013, p. 130), where students can shape their learning experience. For this, they need a clear understanding of what skills are being targeted. They need opportunities for growth, but without being tied to grades. Instead of ‘practicing’ a skill, students might be encouraged to ‘try it out’ or ‘give it a shot’; all in a low-stakes manner without formal assessment. Just as important: the activities need to be engaging. I soon learned that my approach was uninformed. Trying to forcefully contort our learning activities to include structured practice was stifling student engagement and enthusiasm. I needed to find ways for students to explore content while practicing skills, but on their terms. Interactive activities, games, tech-tools; it was time to do some experimenting.

Over the last few years, through trial-and-error, things have improved. Proficiency-based assessment and creating flexible pathways for students have been at the center of my pedagogy. The skills we have practiced have clearly articulated in learning targets. How we have practiced them became opportunities for students to explore content. This move to skill-centered teaching opened up a lot of doorways. I stopped fretting about the depth and breadth of what to teach. Instead, my focus became guiding students in exploring class content in all its ubiquitous glory. My job became supporting their exploration while choosing the skills to practice. Students started to design learning activities based on their interests. It was remarkable noting the change in student ownership of our learning. Three years earlier, and in spite of my best efforts to enthusiastically roll-out class content, a student might respond to instructions with the deflatingly morose question, “Do we have to?” Now, before class has even begun, students barge into the classroom inquiring about our ongoing activities by asking, “Today do we get to...?”

In Practice

Things are not perfect. They never will be. There will always be space for improvement. That is teaching in general. That being said, however, I started this school year with new levels of organized practice activities involving student

choice. I have also included a broader range of tech-tools and game-based opportunities for content exploration. On top of this, I have worked to improve my language with students; trying to be pointed and transparent in communicating our learning goals. The results, as I have been happy to observe, have been successful.

I teach on a 6-8th grade team, and all grade levels are starting off the year examining the 2016 presidential election. A fellow Social Studies teacher, Diana, and I worked this summer to plan a proficiency-based election unit. It is complete with clearly articulated learning targets, performance-based assessments, and heaps of flexible pathways for student voice and choice. The two central skills we are focusing on are: 1) using domain-specific vocabulary; and 2) organized and thorough note-taking.

Our process, a curriculum cycle, generally follows the structure stretched out by Meg years earlier (Derewianka, 2009). When planning, once our learning outcomes, skills, and resources (the “big pieces”) were in place, Diana and I set to work designing practice activities. One thing any effective middle level educator knows is that plans, inevitably, will change. It is late September, and we are still building up to the first independent performances of students; the first assessments that will be recorded on our digital reporting platform. The following table sums up the scope of our practice activities for each skill:

Skill	Domain-Specific Vocabulary	Organized, Thorough Note-Taking
I (teacher-led)	U.S. citizenship test questions	Group reading + teacher-shared notes
We (group)	Word/definition matching activity	Group collaboration + gallery feedback
You (partners)	Quizlet games w/ four levels	Exploring election issues + note-taking
*You (independent)	“Political Platform” final project	Issue exploration + final project notes

*You (independent) is the only level at which student performances are formally assessed.

Communication has been essential to the success of this unit. This is another area where brain-based research emphasizes the importance of clear and stress-free instructions; all to help focus and relax the “dynamic and constantly changing” mind of an adolescent, (Jensen, 2005, p. 11). This year students have often heard me use the following phrases: “this is a low-stakes activity” and “this is a great time to fail.” It is commonplace for contemporary middle level students to grasp the assumption that any task, activity, or assignment (any ‘schoolwork’) will inevitably be tagged with a grade. I still hear the question, “Are we being graded for this?” It is not particularly surprising as their parents, and generations before, have been trained to expect this grade-based emphasis on their school experience. In many ways this traditional model, which “places such outsized value on academic credentials” (Dintersmith & Wagner, 2015, p. 8) still exists. I have been battling this mindset in my move to proficiency-based assessment. Throughout, I have had to earn the trust of my students; show them that they are not being tricked when I put an impromptu content-based quiz in front of them:

“I thought you weren’t grading us, Mr. Nelson.”
 “I’m not. Not on memorizing content.”
 “Then why are we taking a quiz?”
 “So you can see how familiar you are with the content. Just give it a try.”

Meaningful Practice

A simple, ungraded quiz (especially when students struggle) is a great start for a conversation. I will remind students that memorizing content is *not* what they are assessed on; it is what they do with their knowledge of content. But you cannot work with what you do not know. Therefore, low-stakes practice activities (games, quizzes, puzzles, etc.) based on class content are a beautiful accompaniment to skill-building. Ungraded or self-assessed quizzes, differentiated by student ability, can be designed to offer positive elements of traditional assessment (gratification, self-confidence, simple to review) without the negative reinforcement (low grades, conceived failure). These content-based activities supplement the work students are doing to improve their skills.

A prime example is the domain-specific vocabulary skill attached to this year’s election unit. Students will ultimately need to thoroughly

and effectively apply election vocabulary to their final “Political Platform” projects (speeches, campaign ads, etc.). Becoming familiar with these vocabulary terms, therefore, becomes an opportunity for some dynamic practice activities. Quizlet offers digital games designed to quiz students and improve their vocabulary comprehension. Small group games of “Election Vocabulary Memory” make for a fun in-class warm up activity. Ungraded, self-assessed pop quizzes provide immediate feedback to students in a low-stakes, worry-free format. It has become a cultural shift for my students to anticipate or even, dare I say, *enjoy* being quizzed on content knowledge.

Our heaviest focus this year has been working, at multiple levels, to improve note-taking skills. Over the first month of this school year students have defined, explored, and engaged in note-taking in the following ways:

- Student-led discussion: the *What/Why/How?* of note-taking
- Class wide exploration: four major types of note-taking strategies (explanations + examples)
- Teacher-led demonstration: group reading about the *Voting System in America* with notes
- Student collaboration: group posters with shared notes to create one product
- Peer review: gallery-style with student feedback and assessment on the learning target
- Election 2016 Bingo!: small group practice reading election issues and practicing note-taking

This all builds up to a final step in the “Election Bingo!” game. Students will independently demonstrate their note-taking ability while selecting one of the articles on major election issues. Much of the success with our work this year has come from the variety, flexibility, and engaging manner of these modes of practice. Throughout, students have had opportunities to choose between note-taking strategies, choose partners, and choose election issues to explore. While doing so, the focus has been for students to develop an understanding of what note-taking strategies work for them, while honing their skills.

Assessment and Reflection

My goal is that students, by the time they have completed a graded assessment, will immediately know how they did. This requires planning: crafting sensible and engaging activities where students can practice a targeted skill numerous times before performing independently. This also requires communication: sharing clearly articulated learning targets that describe, precisely, what being marked as “partially emerging, emerging, meeting, and extending” means.

This process is expanded for unit-end summative assessments. In our current election unit, each class has been working to improve their proficiency with the skills connected to the content. Soon, though, each student will receive a handout describing their summative performance-based assessment (Diana and I call these “unit goals” to dial back the teachery language). In it, students review the learning targets for our connected skills and receive explicit explanations of what each level requires. Note-taking expectations are shown in Table 1.

Expectations:

- Create thorough and organized notes that relate to your political platform (project).
- Include notes on your beliefs and connections to similarities and differences between the presidential candidates.

At partially emerging, a student will...

- List facts.

At Emerging, a student will...

- Complete everything in the 1 category, as well as list facts that relate to your political platform (beliefs), as well as the presidential candidates.

At Meeting, a student will...

- Complete everything in the 2 category, as well as maintaining them in a thorough and organized manner to clearly show understanding of major election issues.

At Extending, a student will...

- Complete everything in the 3 category, as well as categorizing my notes in a way that best suits the needs of my political platform (project).

In every unit this year I will be including similar sets of unit goals with clearly articulated expectations. Of course, there will be numerous opportunities to practice the targeted skills, and built-in time for teacher, peer, and self-assessment. With these supports in place, by the time a formally assessed activity arrives, students can most often identify precisely where their performance lands on a learning target.

After students complete their performance tasks, I have them complete a self-assessment and reflection. This is a helpful final step with any learning activity. In a simple and engaging fashion (think digital tools a la Google Forms, Nearpod, Dot-storming, Protean) students are prompted to assess their own work and reflect on their performance. In particular, the feedback students share, be it their strengths/successes or their areas of focus for improvement, informs my planning for the future.

Growing Independence

These days my unit outlines (curriculum maps, KUDs, overviews) look much different than before the onset of proficiency-based assessment. Complex, nuanced, interconnected: content is the vehicle conveying practice activities while student voice and choice augment their engagement. All of the inspired planning in the world would not amount to a thing, though, if there is not student buy-in. Student investment is the key component needed to “create self-motivated, lifelong learners,” (Armstrong, 2016, p. 44). Put simply, students must find value in their time spent at school. They need opportunities to craft learning activities, find flexibility in their approach to content, and recognize their own skill development. When this is the case, they take on a whole new understanding of their role as students.

Earlier this year, I knowingly plopped a vocabulary pop-quiz in front of students. Amidst the cacophony of gasps one student made an astute remark: “But Mr. Nelson, we haven’t practiced this.” No we had not. Her remark was so honest, so true, and so reasonable. I loved that she recognized the inequity. So I happily informed her that, indeed, the quiz would not be graded; that it would be a failure as an educator to expect performance from underprepared students. She smiled, turned to the quiz, and worked without worry. It made me wonder: in the past how many pop-quizzes had I

administered? How many times had I asked underprepared students to perform? Most importantly: how often did I grade and record the results anyway?

In most cases, students will never be *completely* prepared. Even after this election season, we will be revisiting these same skills but applying them during new units, to new content, and in new ways. So it will be then, as it has been this past month, that students will explore the content, focus on developing their skills, and engage in practice activities. This will include teacher-led demonstrations, collaborative projects, and group-based exploration. The content will change and the skills will cycle throughout the year. Communication of learning outcomes will be clear and precise. Students will have opportunities for choice and voice to influence our work together. Throughout it all, my focus will be to improve my effectiveness as an educator. Practicing to get better. Just like students.

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Table 1

Note-taking Expectations

Clear + Effective Communication: Demonstrate Organized and Purposeful Communication				
	I list facts as my notes.	I list facts as my notes that relate to the purpose/topic.	I can take thorough and organized notes that connect to the purpose/topic.	I organized my notes based on categories relevant to their purpose; my choices help me understand the material.