Co-Design as a Lever for Increasing Student Agency: Assessment for Learning in New Hampshire

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The Assessment for Learning Project (ALP) is a multi-year grant program and field-building initiative designed to fundamentally rethink the roles that assessment can and should play to advance student learning and improve K-12 education in the United States. If assessment is to become a lever for improving individual students' opportunities and capacities to learn, then assessment must also become a lever for achieving more equitable education outcomes. Led by the Center for Innovation in Education (CIE) at the University of Kentucky in partnership with Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC) at EDUCAUSE, the ALP project aims to develop the field's professional capacity to design and assess learning experiences in ways that simultaneously promote meaningful and equitable student learning. This memo, which is the second in a series of five, highlights the work of New Hampshire Learning Initiative (NHLI), a member of the ALP network. The memo describes their efforts to support educators across the state to actively engage students as partners in co-designing learning goals and assessment strategies, showcasing how these efforts have enriched the experiences of teachers and students in two districts.

Big Ideas and Insights from this Memo

- State policies, such as those that require competency-based credit determinations and integrate locally developed performance assessments in the state accountability system, can create enabling conditions for the significant changes in teaching and learning necessary for realizing a competency-based and personalized learning system.
- Students learn to become active agents of their own learning when teachers engage them as partners in *co-designing* assessment for learning practices.

About This Series

This series of field-facing memos describes promising assessment for learning practices. The series examines the various ways in which Assessment for Learning Project grantees are using, adapting, and creating assessment practices oriented to learning. To see the full series, please visit *https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/library/publications/Assessment_for_Learning_Project*

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- When educators engage students in *co-design*, they can shift from high levels of teacher control to increased student control over what is learned (learning goals), how it is learned (instruction), and how learning is demonstrated (assessment).
- New Hampshire educators have found increasing student control of learning goals to be more challenging than increasing student control over instruction and assessment.

Why Assessment for (Rather Than of) Learning Is Needed

Most educators recognize that standardized tests are inadequate for knowing how to improve student performance and teaching practice. Many would also agree with researcher David Conley who observed, "Over the past ten years, educators have learned the distinction between summative and formative assessments" (2015, p. 27). Yet, Linda Darling-Hammond, Gene Wilhoit, Linda Pittenger (2014), David Conley (2015), and others, have argued that educators still need to deepen their assessment knowledge and use a broader range of assessments in order to prepare students adequately for college and career. They point to recent research that has identified "a much more comprehensive, multi-faceted, and rich portrait of what constitutes a college-ready student," and argue that we now know adequate preparation for college and career will require "much more than content knowledge and foundational skills in reading and mathematics" (Conley, 2015, p. 12). Thus, they describe the increasing importance for students to know how to handle assignments or tasks that do not have one right answer, to raise pertinent questions, to gather additional information, to reason with evidence, and, ultimately, to make judgments in complex and dynamic situations.

Developing such abilities in our youth will help students engage in what they are learning and have ample opportunity to develop the necessary skills and dispositions to manage complexity. Standardized assessments neither teach nor measure such skills. Therefore, to help students be well prepared to succeed in college and career, a broad range of assessments and instructional practices are needed that develop students' abilities to think deeply, to reason with evidence, to make connections across subjects, and to formulate meaningful questions. Providing access to assessments that measure ambitious learning and supporting teachers to use these assessment approaches to help students learn are also important levers for equity.

ALP Grantees are Developing Assessment for Learning Practices

Given the significant need for the development and use of assessments that promote and measure more complex student-learning outcomes, ALP has awarded grants to a group of diverse grantees—including individual schools, charter school organizations, a state department of education, public school districts, and intermediary organizations—that are developing assessments and assessment practices that foreground learning. In its unique approach to grant making, ALP actively supports its grantees and the organizations they serve to continue to learn in and from their individual and collective assessment for learning work. This memo offers a description and analysis of one grantee's promising assessment for learning practices. The grantees featured in this and subsequent memos were selected with ALP's assistance and represent the full range of grantee-types in the project. The aim is to identify and observe promising assessment for learning practices in use by grantees, learn about the development and implementation of these practices, and consider to what extent these practices advance ALP's learning agenda.

Co-Design: Another Step Forward in New Hampshire's Journey Towards a Competency-based and Personalized Educational System

Educators in New Hampshire have been working for more than a decade to transform the educational system to one that is competency-based and personalized. In 2005, the state became the first in the nation to pass statewide regulations to create a competency-based education system (Freeland, 2014). Advocates of competency-based educational systems argue that this approach can improve students' learning experiences and outcomes by measuring students' mastery of specific learning targets or "competencies" rather than seat time (i.e., course or grade completion) and, thus, allow for personalizing each student's learning experience based on when students are ready to demonstrate mastery and their individual learning needs (Le, Wolfe, & Steinberg, 2014). Notably, this system is focused on not only *academic competencies* (i.e., demonstrating mastery over mathematics content) but also what the state describes as the *Work-Study Practices* necessary for success in college, career, and life. Specifically, these Work-Study Practices address communication, creativity, collaboration, and self-direction. Although state regulations for competency-based credit determinations could be met by using more traditional assessments—such as multiple choice or short answer assessments—state educational leaders and experts argue that complex performance assessments are particularly useful for determining students' mastery of academic content and Work-Study Practices as part of a competency-based system (Marion & Leather, 2015). Performance assessments require students to construct an original response and, thus, can test the application of deep content knowledge and higher order thinking skills. When performance assessments are closely connected to curriculum and instruction, they can provide more in-depth information about students' knowledge and skills than traditional selected response tests.

In 2014, New Hampshire took another step forward towards a competency-based and personalized education system by working to redesign the state accountability system to more closely link assessment with curriculum and instruction. The state successfully submitted a waiver to the federal government to reduce annual, summative statewide testing requirements under NCLB to three required tests—once in elementary, middle, and high school—as well as to establish the Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE) pilot program. In essence, PACE aims to connect curriculum, instruction, and assessment more closely by establishing a system of assessment that integrates locally developed and curriculum-embedded performance assessments, common (across districts) summative performance assessments, and Smarter Balanced assessments for accountability purposes rather than relying solely on standardized end-of-year assessments to measure student progress. In this way, PACE is well aligned with ALP's goal of moving assessment away from a focus on a single assessment used for high-stakes determinations and towards a system of assessment focused on improving outcomes for students, teachers, schools, and the state's educational system more broadly. A core goal of PACE is to redesign the state's assessment system to one that emphasizes *assessment for learning* by providing timely information to teachers and their students that can be used to inform and adapt the teaching and learning activities in which they engage.

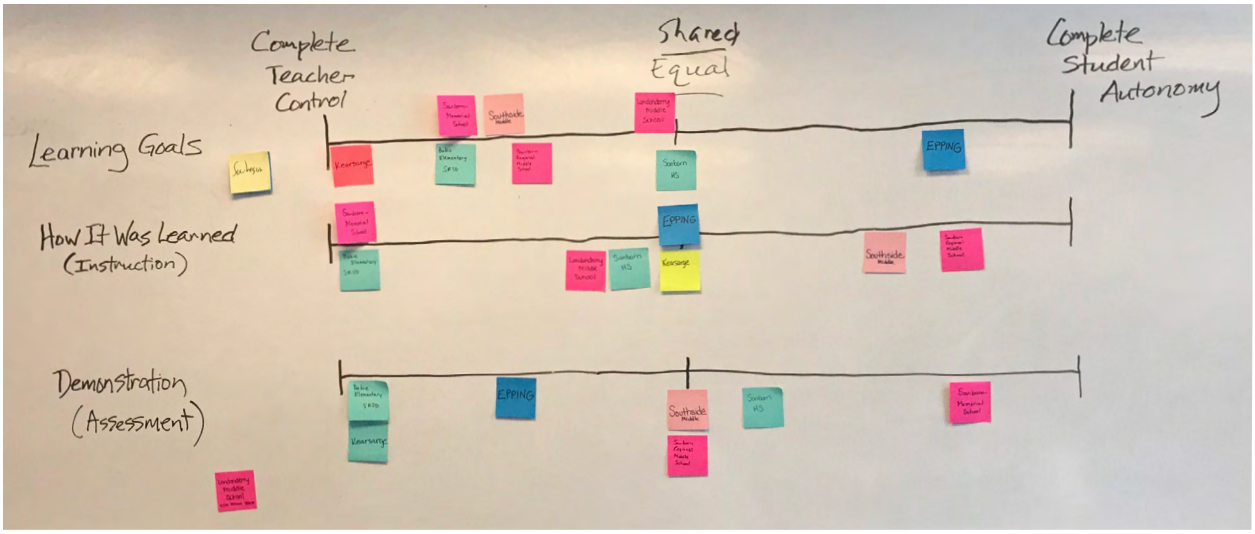
As an ALP grantee, NHLI convened a network of K-12 educators from participating PACE districts called the Next Generation Collaborative Learning Design Project to deepen and connect their efforts to improve curriculum, instruction, and assessment. As one of the project's leaders explained, PACE provides the accountability framework, and this group of PACE districts is doing the deep work of strengthening teaching and learning to align with their goals for a competency-

based and personalized system. She remarked, "Performance assessment isn't something you can just lay on top of traditional teaching."

Educators participating in the Next Generation Collaborative Learning Design Project are working on two assessment for learning practices—*curriculum replacement units and exhibitions*—with three shared elements: a focus on co-design to increase study agency and a connection to both *academic competencies* and *Work-Study Practices*. Replacement units are an approach to integrate curriculum with formative and summative assessment so that assessments can better inform instructional decision making. Notably, these replacement units "are designed to address the same topics as existing units, but would do so in ways that embody the common core standards and promote deeper learning than typically occurs" (Marion & Shepard, 2010, p. 3). Thus, they are intended to strengthen rather than add to the existing curriculum and do so through increased attention to integrating curriculum and assessment. Student exhibitions are an opportunity to demonstrate mastery in a way that requires high levels of self-direction and student choice and can serve as a culminating experience of a personalized and competency-based learning process. Student exhibitions are a focus of NHLI's efforts since they can provide students with authentic opportunities to engage in and further develop critical work-student practices, including collaboration, communication, creativity, and self-direction.

As educators in the Next Generation Collaborative Learning Design Project are engaged in these two practices—replacement units and exhibitions—they are focusing on co-design as a strategy for transforming the teacher-student relationship to heighten students' involvement and control over their learning. Co-designed assessment—also known as student-led assessment—is not a new phenomenon. This work builds on ideas of student-centered learning and authentic student engagement in the learning process (Dewey, 1938). Recent research suggests that engaging students as partners in the assessment process can support students in developing self-regulatory learning processes (Bailey & Heritage, 2018) or what New Hampshire educators describe as "self-direction" in their Work-Study Practices.

Importantly, assessments are not simply student-led or not, co-designed or not, but rather exist along a continuum from complete teacher control to complete student control. NHLI is supporting teachers in moving towards higher levels of student control over their learning experiences in an effort to increase student agency over their learning. Increased opportunities for student agency—or voice and choice over what and how they learn—can increase students' motivation to learn and prepare them to lead their learning in school, career, and life. During two recent NHLI network meetings, teams of educators were asked to reflect on the degree to which their efforts to design and use replacement units and exhibitions reflected "complete teacher control," "shared authority," or "complete student control" over their learning in three key areas: what is learned (curriculum goals), how it is learned (instruction), and how it is demonstrated (assessment). Reflecting on the continuum depicted on the poster, educators noted that teachers retained the most control over the learning goals and were the most likely to allow high levels of student control over how they demonstrated their learning. Additionally, educators noticed that most teams clustered under "shared authority" or "complete student control" for all three categories were middle and high schools, whereas elementary school teams were more likely to sit between "complete teacher control" and "shared authority." This prompted elementary educators to discuss strategies for releasing greater control to students and the scaffolding students would need to be successful, particularly in grades K-2. For example, they discussed how teachers may set learning goals for a unit, but students could set their individual goals for what they wanted to learn during a particular activity within the unit. Educators' discussion of the continuum reflect NHLI's focus on pushing



educators to rethink and redesign their current curricular units and exhibitions to heighten student agency for their learning, even among the youngest students.

This past summer, educators in the NHLI network came together as part of a symposium intended to support them in reflecting on their progress and identifying next steps for further deepening and personalizing students' learning experiences through co-design. In the sections that follow, we describe the experiences of educators in two districts—Sanborn and Souhegan—and the lessons they have learned in working to increase student agency for learning through co-design of replacement units and student exhibitions.

Replacement Units Allow Students to be the "Boss" of their Learning

Elementary educators in Sanborn Regional School District have been designing replacement units using co-design and emphasizing Work-Study Practicesalong with academic competencies. They have worked on incorporating Work-Study Practices, such as creativity and collaboration, within their unit and are trying to be more aware of developing these Work-Study Practices each time they work with students. Additionally, they are getting more comfortable with the co-design approach. A teacher explained that they are still "figuring out ways that children can help [the teachers] design the unit instead of telling them what to do." As part of this, they are working to increase student agency by "providing students choices in terms of where to go, how to present their information, and how to get more of the learning in." In other words, they have made progress in giving students' greater control over how they learn (instruction) and how they demonstrate their learning (assessment).

New Hampshire's Work-Study Practices

New Hampshire describes the Work-Study Practices as the behaviors that enhance learning and promote a positive work ethic. They include:

- Communication: Students use various media to interpret and express knowledge, feelings, and reasoning.
- Creativity: Students use original thinking to communicate ideas or develop a solution.
- Collaboration: Students work in diverse groups to achieve a common goals.
- Self-Direction: Students initiate and manage their own learning.

Students in Sanborn who participated in the replacement units described being the "boss" of their own learning. As one student remarked, "I like this project because we're the boss." Students exercised ownership over their own learning during units investigating plants, animals, and community by selecting the focus of their learning (e.g., selecting the animal they would study or their approach for enhancing plant growth), determining how they would learn about this topic (e.g., identifying books or websites for learning more on the topic), and how they would demonstrate their learning (e.g., developing a poster or book, giving an oral presentation). In one replacement unit, students were asked to identify an animal that they thought should represent their school as the new mascot, learn about the characteristics of the animal, and develop a persuasive argument in the format of their choice, describing why this animal reflected the values of their school. A teacher explained, "They owned it—I picked this animal, and I want to learn about this animal. They get to choose this book.…They were really motivated." When students had greater voice and choice over their learning, they were more motivated to learn.

According to Sanborn teachers, these replacement units represent a meaningful shift in their instruction towards increased student ownership of their learning, and seeing their students in action has raised their expectations for the work they and their students can do. One teacher remarked, "It's exciting to see what kindergarten students can do. We need to empower them and, with the right supports in place, they do have that capability." Another teacher credited co-design for this shift: "It was so cool having the co-design piece. [Students] did so much more than I ever thought they could do." She explained that, in the past, she had focused much more on "rote" learning, whereas now her students were taking greater control of their learning and "communicating about what they learned." Another teacher reflected on the process:

> *When you're really doing co-design, not only are you co-designing the unit, every single day you're looking at where the kids are at…taking the temperature of where they are and adjusting to that.…You know where you're going, but you don't know exactly how you're going to get there.*

These teachers had developed and taught different replacement units but had similar experiences—when students were given the opportunity to take greater ownership over their learning, they rose to the challenge in ways that increased their engagement in the learning process.

Elementary teachers said it was a challenge to ask young students to determine what and how they would learn because students were still figuring out what school could look like and the different ways they could learn and demonstrate competency. A teacher explained that students were used to being told what to do, so, as part of the co-design approach, they have helped students learn to self-evaluate their strengths and areas for improvement. Another approach has been to give students "controlled choice"; in other words, students select how to demonstrate their learning by selecting from multiple predefined options, such as creating a poster, song, letter, or newscast. At the same time, teachers noted that students would have to have experience with each of these approaches to demonstrating their learning—the performance assessment—before being able to select and move forward with one of these approaches more independently. This created pressure for teachers to use varied approaches to assessment early in the year to help prepare younger students for these opportunities.

Co-Design Transforms the Junior Research Experience

At Souhegan High School, teachers "reimagined their junior research paper [as] a junior research project." Like elementary educators in Sanborn, they redesigned an existing element of the curriculum to increase opportunities for

developing student agency and critical Work-Study Practices, such as communication. The junior research paper had been in place since the school opened about 25 years ago and was designed to prepare students to complete a year-long senior research project on a topic of their choosing. In redesigning the junior research paper as a research project, teachers aimed to incorporate an exhibition or "defense" of learning and emphasize the development of all four Work-Study Practices—communication, creativity, collaboration, and self-direction. In the past, Souhegan educators noticed that students' research process would sometimes focus on "cherry picking" quotes to include in their paper instead of learning about something in depth; with the redesigned junior research project, students cannot go on to writing up their research findings until they have mastered the research and defense components of the project. In redesigning this part of the junior curriculum, they worked in partnership with students and, in doing so, were pushed to create a deeper learning experience than they had originally anticipated.

When students became involved in co-designing the junior research project, they encouraged teachers to raise the expectations for the project and allow more time for them to become "experts" on their topic. As a first step, teachers assembled a focus group of juniors and seniors to provide feedback on how they thought the junior research project should be structured. Then they asked students in their classes for feedback to learn from a broader range of students. A teacher remarked, "The kids were really invested in doing good work. Everything had to do with making it better. None [of their feedback] was about making it easier." By listening to the student feedback, they arrived at a new question to guide the redesign—How could the junior research project be modified to increase students' depth of knowledge? A teacher explained that this came from the students, who wanted to know more before they began writing up their research findings.

Students at Souhegan describe the junior and senior research projects as important learning opportunities because they allow each student to pursue their "passion," which makes learning more meaningful and more likely to influence their life beyond high school. A student explained,

> *I think that being able to study what you're passionate about makes your learning that much more important and meaningful. And really makes the things that you're learning in school and connected to your passion set in that much more and be that much more integrated into what you know and what you can use for the future.*

One student at the school described how her senior project connected to her passion for baseball; currently, she was the only female playing high school baseball in the state. Her essential question explored whether a female can be successful in a predominantly male sport and investigated both the personal implications as well as the connections to Title IX. This student remarked that these kinds of opportunities for student agency over their learning aren't typical: "I think it is unique how we have so many opportunities here

Student Voices

With support from ALP, NHLI has developed an online "student voices" exhibit that showcases students' reflections about their learning, including the power of being the "boss" of their own learning, the motivation that comes from studying something they are passionate about, and the importance of developing key Work-Study Practices such as collaboration. The goal of developing a student voices exhibit(tion is to collect a broad range of student perspectives that can inform efforts to develop and strengthen assessment for learning practices.

Listen to New Hampshire students speak about their assessment experiences: https://sites.google.com/view/nhlistudentvoices/home

where we can choose topics that we're interested in. …I think that's really important in getting students excited about what they're learning."

Building on feedback from their student co-designers, teachers plan to pilot and continue to conduct action research on the junior research project—a research-based performance assessment. Teachers described one of the central challenges as building in opportunities and curriculum that would prepare students to be successful with the redesigned research project. This has raised questions about the learning experiences that would be needed in 11th grade but also in 9th and 10th grade to prepare students to take ownership over their research project. A teacher remarked, "The school is expecting them to do certain things by their senior project and how does what they're learning in previous grades map to that?" Similarly, another teacher said, "It's daunting to get everyone on board teaching what is needed before the 11th grade project." As these teachers' comments illustrate, the junior research project—an extended and complex performance assessment—created positive pressure for teachers across grades and subjects to come together to prepare students for success with these culminating experiences. Too often, these kinds of deep learning experiences can exist as an isolated experience in a single class. Teachers at Souhegan are working to use these assessment for learning experiences to inform the curriculum at the school more broadly in an effort to deepen and personalize students' learning experiences.

Related Challenges Worth Considering

The Assessment for Learning Project challenges grantees to rethink *assessment for learning* and the role of assessment in continuous improvement in schools and systems. New Hampshire educators have been working to transform their educational system to one that is competency-based and personalized for over a decade and assessment redesign has played a central role in this process. This statewide effort has put in place policies—such as competency-based grade determinations, sustained professional development support for assessment redesign, and a redesigned approach to accountability (i.e., PACE)—that create a supportive environment for as well as positive pressure to redesign assessment in ways that foreground learning. Moreover, Sanborn and Souhegan educators' experiences in the Next Generation Collaborative Learning Design Project illustrate how additional progress in assessment redesign can support and generate further pressure for system transformation. When essential opportunities for engaging in assessment for learning practices, such as replacement units or exhibitions, exist in a single course (i.e., social studies) or grade-level, it can be challenging to develop shared ownership for preparing students across grades and subjects. A collaborative approach is necessary for realizing school and system-wide change in students' assessment experiences, and this collaborative approach may be most powerful when it includes collaboration among teachers across grades and subjects as well as teacher-student collaboration through co-design of student learning and assessment. In New Hampshire, state policies create enabling conditions for transforming how teachers and students work together around curriculum, instruction, and assessment, encouraging further progress towards a competency-based and personalized system.

Reflection Questions

The reflection questions are intended to spark consideration about how efforts to engage in co-design can increase students' agency over what they learn, how they learn, and how they demonstrate their learning.

- In New Hampshire, state policies focused on competency-based and personalized learning—including the competency-based credit system, PACE accountability pilot, and

investment in performance assessment—have created supportive conditions for assessment redesign. How do your school's or system's current assessment practices align or conflict with your state and district policies? What, if any, policies allow for or encourage student choice and voice in the assessment process?

- Curriculum, instruction, and assessment can be thought to exist along a continuum from total teacher control to shared authority to complete student control. Consider students' current learning experiences in your school or system, what experiences allow for the greatest student control over what they learn, how they learn, and how they demonstrate their learning? Where do you give students the most control—learning goals, instruction, or assessment? What learning experiences could serve as opportunities for increasing students' agency over their learning? When is it appropriate for adults to be more in control of learning? When is it appropriate for students to be in control of their learning? How do you know?
- Co-design is a strategy for teachers and students to work as partners in planning learning and assessment. In the primary grades, teachers may ask students to set a daily learning goal as part of the learning process; whereas, teachers may work directly with secondary students to design major projects. What elements of "co-design" currently exist in your school? What actions could you take to increase students' involvement and, ultimately, students' investment in learning and assessment? How might co-design look different for students at different grade-levels? Why?

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