
Creating Independent Learners: placing students at the heart of the assessment process

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ABSTRACT Stanley Park High School, Carshalton, was designated a Building Schools for the Future 'One School Pathfinder' in 2006 and charged with being innovative in all aspects of schooling. At a time of increasing compliance in schools, with an unwillingness to deviate from centrally controlled orthodoxy for fear of falling foul of ever-tightening accountability measures, Stanley Park High has striven to establish a curriculum which inspires excellence for all students as well as developing an equitable assessment system which enables students to become equal partners in their own learning.

Context

It is a warm July afternoon and across the atrium Year 8 students are waiting with eager anticipation for the afternoon to come. After two years of studying our bespoke Excellent Futures Curriculum (EFC), each of the 240 students will take it in turn over the next two days to present their portfolio of work to a panel which includes their parents, their tutor, school governors, visiting educators and other key school stakeholders. In a classroom one such student, Charlotte, nervously waits to begin.

Welcome to my graduation presentation. Please take a seat here next to my tutor. Today I am going to tell you a story about a young girl named Charlotte and how she has changed from a shy, anxious Year 7 pupil to the student stood before you today. Throughout this twenty minute presentation I am going to be talking to you about the learning journey I have been on over the last two years at Stanley Park High. By looking closely at examples of my work I am going to reflect on my strengths and areas for development as well

as talk to you about my hopes and worries for Year 9. Please feel free to ask questions throughout.

This is not the first time Charlotte has presented her learning to an audience. Graduation presentations such as these are not conducted in isolation at Stanley Park High, they are just one way in which students are empowered to take control of their own learning. The constraints of an assessment system which require grades to demonstrate progress have been removed; assessment is not used for ranking students. Instead, its core purpose is to inspire excellence, encourage student reflection and ultimately increase independence.

Our Bespoke KS3 Curriculum

Our approach to assessment is multifaceted and is carefully woven into our curriculum design, particularly in the EFC. After seeking inspiration from other schools, most notably Mike Davies' 'Tartan Curriculum' at Bishops Park College Clapton, the EFC programme was designed by the school's teachers and leadership team specifically for our Year 7 and 8 students. Instead of studying several individual subjects at Key Stage 3 (KS3), Stanley Park High students have twelve lessons of EFC per week in Year 7 and seven lessons in Year 8. English, maths, science, PE, languages and music are taught separately, and EFC comprises the rest of the curriculum through our project-based learning model. The EFC has also adopted the principle of small-scale learning communities; lessons are taught by the tutor and in each class there will be no more than 24 students, helping to develop the vital close relationships with students and parents upon which our school is founded.

Our curriculum offers a holistic approach to education as it strives to develop both the competencies of the students as well as their academic achievement. One of our fundamental beliefs is that all students can achieve and are capable of excellence. While as staff we know this to be true, not all students who start their high school journey with us in Year 7 believe it. It is therefore our responsibility to change their minds.

High Expectations of All

High expectations of all are paramount, and these are established from the outset. Before students start at Stanley Park High they embark upon their first project: 'A Museum of My Life'. During the induction day, future Year 7 students are asked to create an exhibition about themselves over the summer holidays which will then be showcased to the year group on their first day in September. Parents are also encouraged to take part and are asked to write a small piece about their child which will be read by the tutor. Not only is this a great way to learn about the students, it also establishes the importance of the parent-school relationship and sets the expectation for high-quality work and the importance of exhibition.

During the first week of Year 7 our assessment process is outlined to both students and parents so that all are aware of the expectations for the forthcoming year. In Years 7 and 8 we have replaced the traditional parents' evenings with three 30-minute student-led conferences and one 20-minute graduation presentation. Instead of the teacher providing a summative grade or a judgement, students and their work are placed at the centre of the conversation, not at the periphery. The adults are there to talk with the students and not about them. The equitable format of the student-led conference allows students to articulate their learning and reflect on their achievements; they are encouraged to look through their work and think carefully about the progress they have made. Although the process is carefully scaffolded and the discussion may occasionally be prompted by the tutor, the meetings are primarily a conversation between the parents and children; the role of the tutor is to simply listen, facilitate and encourage.

Parental feedback from the conferences and graduation presentations has been overwhelmingly positive. All students, regardless of context, can confidently articulate their learning and demonstrate pride in their achievements. This is not coincidental but is achieved through careful curriculum planning, frequent opportunities for reflection, and a culture which supports and compels students to achieve. If we want students to engage with their learning this cannot be an abstract process. Instead we need to provide frequent opportunities for students to make independent decisions about their learning, take responsibility for their assessment, and produce work they are proud of. It is only through a sense of accomplishment that their confidence will grow and they will wish to share their learning journey with others.

Real-world Projects and Exhibitions

To achieve this, EFC teachers at Stanley Park High have been given the freedom to move away from the limitations of the National Curriculum in order to develop projects which will motivate and engage students. Walking into an EFC studio, you will see pupils working on real-world projects and developing their passion for learning. Currently, Year 8 students have been working on a project called 'Remembrance' in which they examine a range of historical sources to investigate the causes and conditions of World War I. Together they consider why there is a need to remember, and work collaboratively to organise a memorial event for the local community. Each student creates at least one independent commission to be displayed at the event and will act as a tour guide explaining their learning as they guide visitors through the exhibits.

At the end of each project an exhibition is held and final drafts are made public. When the project outcomes are seen by an external audience the work takes on a whole different meaning. Traditional notions of teacher-led assessment are turned on their head, for the role of the teacher is not to act as judge but instead as a facilitator who is there to guide students and help get their work ready for public view. Feedback on the final products is obtained

from the audience, whether this be parents, other students, community members or professionals from the outside world. Each student therefore has a reason to do the work well and knows that their work matters, so any formative assessment received during the drafting process needs to be taken seriously.

Modelling

Despite the range of assessment tools schools implement, arguably the most important form of assessment happens within the students themselves. Every student has their own understanding of what constitutes good work, and this varies greatly from student to student. In order to ensure that all students produce work of an exhibition standard, teachers need to create the conditions which enable a shared understanding of quality. One way in which we achieve this is through the use of modelling. Every project begins with a close examination of a range of exemplars, including previous student work and examples from the professional world. As a class we will analyse the features of the work and together we will generate our 'Exhibition Standard' criteria – the criteria that every student's final product should meet. As the criteria are co-constructed they are no longer a checklist of abstract terms but instead an accessible tool that students have bought into. The language of the document is owned by the students, providing them with the vocabulary needed to articulate and reflect upon their learning.

Multiple Drafting and Critique

In our EFC we do not use levelled or differentiated criteria as the expectations of all students are the same. We work hard to create the necessary conditions to enable all students to reach the highest standards, and we believe it is important that this is consistent for all. Grades or levels do not need to exist if work isn't considered complete until it represents high-quality work for that child. Any work that would previously have been worthy of a low grade should not be accepted. Instead, opportunities should be given to help develop the work. All of our projects are carefully structured to ensure that no student should fail. Providing regular checkpoints, multiple drafting opportunities and in-depth critique is a cornerstone of our curriculum design. In our classrooms the emphasis is placed on the quality of the work produced and not the quantity, in order to allow students to produce work that meets the standards of the professional world. For this to happen, time needs to be given to develop, rework and improve. If we are going to professionally publish a book that is going to be read by prospective students and external visitors, then we need to make frequent edits. If we are going to perform a play to local community members, rehearsals need to take place. And if we are going to sell a product in the school canteen, recipes need to be revised. In the professional workplace the first draft is rarely accepted, so we shouldn't expect anything different in the classroom.

The Importance of Dialogue

Assessment of learning is enhanced through regular dialogue, so in order to help students develop their understanding we need to offer opportunities for children to articulate their thinking and reflect. Self-assessment and critical evaluation from others form a key part of the process of reviewing what has already been learned throughout the project. At various stages work will be critiqued by other students, teachers and external professionals who have been invited to take part. Frequent gallery walks, where work is shared, are implemented. These help students to be inspired by the excellence of their classmates but not ranked against them. Sometimes this process is formalised as a whole-class critique session and at other times it will be completed in pairs or small groups. However the critique takes place, the most important thing is that the process enables students to reflect and improve.

The Power of Portfolios

Rather than using exercise books, all students are expected to keep portfolios of their work to demonstrate the evolution of a project, which enables them to see their learning journey. By looking closely at their work in this way students can recognise how their work has dramatically improved over the course of the project and they can clearly see how the content they have learnt has helped them progress at each stage. Learning is no longer hidden but is overtly displayed. Structuring the portfolios in this way helps students to recognise that their best work is not an isolated final product but rather that every piece in their folder has value and significance. Assessment becomes ipsative rather than comparative, which in turn fosters intrinsic motivation.

As well as being seen at exhibition, the portfolios are central to a student's preparation for their student-led conference or graduation presentations. The emphasis is placed on the student using the portfolio to themselves choose pieces of work they would like to discuss with their parents or other visitors. Pupils are entrusted to demonstrate their learning by showing examples in their portfolio to support the points they are making. Their reflections are grounded in evidence and are often accompanied by live performances, video or beautifully crafted artefacts. At no point during the conference are grades discussed or even yearned for. Parents are proud to see the progress their children are making, not just in an academic sense but also as shown in their confidence and growth as young people.

A Future of Excellence

The way in which we approach assessment at Stanley Park High is carefully tailored to our students. We have created an assessment system that allows teachers freedom and places students at its heart. Conversation and dialogue is a joint endeavour in order to increase student agency and prepare pupils for a life beyond education. Schools need the freedom to design a system that is not

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confined by the ingrained culture of data and accountability but which is bespoke for their context. There is evidence more important than numerical scores. We need to have confidence in our convictions that there are other ways of assessing learning that do not place a ceiling on students. We need to continue to develop ways to invite students to become equal partners in their own learning. Creating an equitable form of assessment is just one way in which this can be achieved.

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