

Essential Learning: Assessment for Learning Project

Why This Topic

We assess what students know and are able to do for several reasons: to inform teaching and advance learning for individual students; to promote student ownership and agency over their own learning and progress; to create more equitable classrooms and schools; and to benchmark students' collective progress toward district or state expectations. The current approach to assessment in the United States, however, is distorted toward the latter purpose of system accountability, leaving other purposes – those with more direct impacts on learning – underdeveloped.

Seeking to invigorate assessment *for* learning, in 2015 CIE partnered with Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC) and 2Revolutions to launch a field-building and grantmaking initiative called the Assessment for Learning Project (ALP). The initiative centered around a learning agenda with five core questions:

1. How can assessment support a broader definition of student success?
2. What assessment practices most effectively empower students to own and advance their learning?
3. How can we most effectively build educator capacity to gather, interpret, and use evidence of learning to enhance instruction?
4. How does assessment for learning inform broader contexts of accountability, policy and systems design?
5. How can we pursue equity through assessment for learning?

In addition to seeking insights on assessment for learning, CIE and partners designed ALP's structures and processes hoping to illuminate a new model for grantmaking that – like assessment for learning – leads with learning. Traditional grant applications and reporting processes discourage risk-taking and failing-forward by expecting neat, linear progress from pre-fabricated "solutions" to desired outcomes and by frowning upon deviance from this often illusory ideal. By contrast, ALP sought to enable ambitious innovations by valuing learning even in the midst of setbacks and to foster reflective thinking intended to drive not just individual projects but the entire field forward.

Our Learning Process

ALP's unique approach to learning includes four key building blocks which are described below and further elaborated in [*Lessons from the Assessment for Learning Project: Strategies for Building an Authentic Learning Community*](#):

- A field-facing learning agenda,
- Grantmaking that leads with learning and;
- Collective leadership

Instead of the prescriptive priorities of traditional grantmaking initiatives, ALP identified five questions that defined its learning agenda (see above), and asked grantees to propose a unique learning plan of questions tied to the overall agenda. This small change on paper communicates a greater shift of power dynamics in grantmaking, valuing the local knowledge and creativity of grantees and not assuming the grant-maker has already defined the problem and its plausible solutions. And, by tying each proposal to a broader agenda, ALP ensures that insights uncovered by each grantee are not isolated but contribute to key questions challenging the field at large.

Further, the grantmaking process itself was designed to value learning and reflection. ALP began by releasing a “Request for Learning (RFL)” that differed from traditional Requests for Proposals (RFP) by valuing evidence of a “learning orientation” among applicants. Grantees were selected not only on the promise of their proposed innovations but with attention to their openness to feedback, how they intersect with or complement other grantees, and how they address the ALP learning agenda as a body. Grant reporting, too, was designed not for the benefit of the grant-makers but for the advancement of the grantees’ work and broader work in the field: ALP grantees produce demonstrations of learning that capture their progress toward the key questions in their learning plans and are shared to an authentic audience (e.g., their peers in ALP, stakeholders in their systems, and sessions at education conferences).

The last two building blocks of ALP’s design – collective leadership and the ALP learning community – further embody ALP’s commitment to ongoing reflection and learning. ALP’s leadership structure is comprised of three partners with diverse but complementary skillsets, supported by an advisory group of education leaders including researchers, policymakers, and funders. The ALP leadership team continually reflects on its work and uses collaborative decision-making processes to make adjustments and advancements.

Similarly, ALP grantees are intentionally and continuously woven into a learning community that benefits each grantee’s work and broader efforts at field-building. Through peer learning experiences, coaching, and demand-driven technical assistance from “lead learners” within the ALP community, ALP has sought to create a community where grantees support one another and own the identity and social capital of an “assessment for learning” community member.

Insights

The ALP community has produced several insights that address the core questions of the ALP learning agenda while helping to redefine the universe of “assessment for learning.” Among these insights is a deeper understanding of three core purposes that rest at the heart of assessment for learning: to support deeper learning, to foster student agency, and to work toward equity. From these core purposes flow [four core shifts](#) in how we think about assessment: from an isolated to an integrated process; from prioritizing evaluation to prioritizing reflection and feedback; from producing single summary scores to producing a robust body of evidence; and from exposing inequity to purposefully enacting equity. The core purposes and core shifts of assessment for learning can be further evidenced by [10 principles of assessment for learning](#) and can be practiced through the [four core practice domains](#) of performance assessment, formative assessment, a community-engaged portrait of a graduate, and student exhibition and defense. CIE is currently developing a white paper to describe these key learnings in more detail.

In addition to deepening our understanding of assessment for learning, ALP is producing insights on how the process of grantmaking can be redesigned to better support learning, collaboration, and field-building. In its formative evaluation of the ALP project, Social Policy Research Associates highlighted the difference that ALP has made by approaching grantmaking with a learning orientation. First, this orientation “creates opportunities for grantees to take risks, experiment, and engage in authentic and vulnerable exchanges with one another.” It also “‘flips the script’ on expertise,” allowing grantees to step into opportunities for field leadership and reinforcing the importance of the ground-up wisdom of students, families and educators, without whom complex systems change cannot occur. The formative evaluation goes on to list a number of steps that other foundations can take to foster a learning orientation among their grantees:

- Identify a learning orientation as a key dimension of grantee “readiness.”
- Shift the focus of grantmaking from a performance framework, focused on compliance and accountability, to a learning framework, focused on innovation and iteration
- Model the risk-taking, reflection, and vulnerability that is needed to create a safe environment where breakthrough ideas are possible
- Consider relationships as one of the most valuable resources that a funder can offer to a grantee
- Build in opportunities for authentic demonstrations of learning
- Collaborate with grantees on the creation of resources for the field, and
- Use an iterative and phased approach to expand a learning community and broader network.

Future Provocations and Connections

Equity

As CIE continues to [deepen our understanding of equity-seeking systems](#), ALP has provided an abundance of insights on what it means to enact equity in both assessment and grantmaking. For example, our grantee projects have demonstrated how assessment for learning processes can disrupt inequity by creating badges or micro-credentials that reduce barriers and/or provide greater and more equitable access to enrichment; mitigating adults’ implicit biases or lower expectations for “some kids” through scoring calibration processes; and explicitly valuing students’ identities and backgrounds as assets they bring to assessment approaches such as capstone projects or performance assessments.

In fact, one ALP grantee’s story exemplifies how they – like CIE – have expanded their understanding of equity from a narrow focus on closing academic achievement gaps to include broader priorities around diversity and inclusion. Their original project aimed to help students (especially those farthest behind) to move ahead in their learning through a technology platform that students use to provide peer-to-peer feedback on their work. What they found, however, is that students who were already high-achieving and from social in-groups liked and benefitted from the platform, whereas low-achieving students and those from social out-groups (including students with disabilities, English language learners, and other social groups) disliked it because they didn’t feel their feedback was valuable or valued. The grantee quickly realized that their tool – designed to produce equity by closing achievement gaps – was being implemented in a way that reinforced patterns of exclusion and social cues that inequitably

predetermine who has knowledge and whose feedback matters. Their project was failing for the very reason that identity, diversity, and inclusion matter when enacting equity through assessment.

Instead of revoking their grant, ALP invited the grantee to “fail forward” by providing them even more money to explore the issue. The grantee started focusing on creating identity-safe classroom cultures and cultivating an orientation toward vulnerability and learning among their students. Not content to learn on their own, the grantee also enlisted other grantees who were similarly wrestling with equity into a learning community within ALP. Several years into that course correction, they are now being looked to by the broader field as new pioneers working at the intersection of formative assessment, student identity, and culturally responsive teaching. Thus, this grantee’s initial shortcoming in its conception of equity ultimately resulted in stronger equity-seeking work for everyone involved.

We believe that stories like this are possible because of what we have learned about how to center grantmaking around learning; and how to center learning around equity. From the inception of ALP, we focused on creating safe spaces for grantees and grantmakers alike to be vulnerable and learn together when dissecting complex issues that invoke our core values. Then in 2016, ALP made a decision to focus even more explicitly on equity, issuing a provocation at our Scottsdale conference for all grantees to adopt an equity-seeking orientation in their work. Because of our intentionality around equity – and because we had ensured that our grantees possessed a learning orientation in the first place – we have been able to move beyond lip service into work with greater promise to advance equity. This orientation has also enabled us to move beyond tokenism in our efforts to achieve diversity and inclusion. More than inviting a few diverse faces to the table in an outward attempt to appear inclusive, we naturally draw in an increasingly diverse group of people who are already earnestly seeking equity in their own work in the field.

Authentic Community Engagement

CIE has learned that to enact equity through assessment one must consider not only what happens within classrooms but also how the greater community is invited in. Through ALP, we have grasped the value of local wisdom in deciding not only *how* student learning is assessed (for example, including business and community members in authentic audiences and panels evaluating student work) but also *what* is important for students to learn in the first place. For example, our grantees’ work on community-engaged portraits of a graduate demonstrate the power of ownership that can occur when whole communities – not just an array of “experts” plus a handful of educators – are asked to collaboratively determine what they most want from their education systems.

This learning underscores a greater truth guiding CIE’s current and future work: that large-scale systems transformation requires actors to work in concert across multiple levels of the system, from communities and classrooms all the way up to the state house; and, that such partnerships must eschew traditional power hierarchies in favor of true collaboration and shared learning. This notion of shared leadership for systems transformation permeates our other strands of work and guides our thinking as described in [CIE System Transforming Practice Framework](#).

Written by:

Sarah Lench - sarah@leadingwithlearning.org

Jenny Poon - jenny@leadingwithlearning.org