Creating Identity-Safe Spaces So Feedback Can Educate and Motivate Learners

By Ann Jaquith and Elizabeth Leisy Stosich

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), 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 highlights the ongoing work of the Leadership Public Schools (LPS) Network to disrupt inequities by developing and refining student peer feedback practices that emanate from their belief that students are serious and capable learners, thinkers, and doers.

This memo describes what LPS has discovered about creating the conditions in which peer-to-peer feedback motivates and educates each learner. LPS is a network of three high schools in Northern California serving about 1,500 students, 98% identify as people of color, 80% qualify for free and reduced lunch.[1] Many of the students who come to LPS, according to one teacher, "have a really antagonistic relationship with school." This teacher explained that many students have previously experienced school as a place that "categorizes them, and they don't associate fun with school or with learning." Consequently, creating the school conditions in which LPS students feel a sense of enjoyment and belonging is an essential first step to support their learning.

As LPS deepened its understanding of what teachers needed to do to create a sense of belonging for each student, the Network's assessment practices evolved and became increasingly equity-oriented. LPS realized that generating high-quality feedback and enabling students to use that feedback was not merely a matter of giving students greater agency and voice in the assessment process. Rather, LPS educators noticed a student's capacity to meaningfully engage with feedback was influenced by a constellation of factors, such as the student's sense of self-worth, purpose, and confidence; feelings of connection to the school; perceived social status; and relationship to the subject matter and teacher. Therefore, when LPS surveyed and talked with students about their experiences with the feedback practices that LPS had implemented that were meant to create equity, they discovered some students didn't feel safe. Students told them: "I wonder how honest they are being," and "I can tell some of the students who get my feedback don't take my ideas seriously because I'm not considered a good student," and "Students are biased to their buddies." To their dismay LPS discovered their most vulnerable students—"students with learning gaps, English language gaps, [areas] where they don't feel super proficient"— benefitted the least from these feedback practices. LPS administrators quickly recognized that its peer-to-peer feedback practices, while carefully orchestrated to emulate best practices, were still reproducing systems of privilege in the classroom. LPS was determined to figure out how to disrupt these entrenched patterns of inequity.

Their realization, and the brave Network leadership that called attention to it, led LPS to a critical insight and courageous conversations. Leaders at LPS began to wonder: "How would [LPS] combine the technical and adaptive [knowledge and skills teachers needed to ensure that assessment becomes a lever for equitable education outcomes]? How could [LPS] articulate and demystify all of those skills that it takes to do formative assessment in the service of equity and blend them together?" LPS understood that integrating feedback practices into teaching in service of equity required not only having technical knowledge but also possessing a deep understanding of students' strengths, interests, and needs and having an awareness of when and how students can feel judged on the basis of their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, language, sexual orientation, and so on.

Acting upon this knowledge meant educators at LPS needed to be alert to and examine their own (perhaps unconscious) assumptions, biases, and negative stereotypes about groups of people. This insight also meant LPS needed to adapt its assessment and feedback practices to the particular strengths, interests, and needs of individual students learning specific subject matter. Teachers needed to develop the capacity to use these practices to shape classroom dynamics in order to motivate and support students' learning. Leadership scholar Ron Heifetz (1994), known for his work on what leaders must do to distinguish technical problems from adaptive challenges, says technical problems "have known solutions that can be implemented by current know-how" whereas adaptive challenges "can only be addressed through changes in people's priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties" (p. 19). LPS embarked on a learning journey to change educators' priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties.

Making assessment a lever for equity is a challenge that has both technical and adaptive elements. According to Heifetz and colleagues, "making progress [on adaptive challenges] requires going beyond any authoritative expertise to mobilize discovery,

shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating the new capacity to thrive anew" (2009, p. 19). This memo describes what LPS learned—from its initial, more technical approach to supporting peer-to-peer feedback in classrooms using the Collective Feedback Tool to its current and ongoing efforts to help teachers learn about and adopt identity-safe instructional practices (Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013) and to help teachers make equity-informed decisions that enable student learning.

Big Ideas and Insights from This Memo

- Seek out students' experiences with new assessment tools and practices in order to understand for whom and under what conditions learning increases. The feedback might reveal that tools or practices don't work as anticipated or desired. Paying attention to and sharing this feedback can become a catalyst for more effective teaching and deeper learning.

- Students need to feel a sense of belonging and that they are welcomed, supported, and valued in the classroom, regardless of their background, in order for feedback to educate and motivate them.

- Providing feedback that enables learning requires technical know-how, knowledge of students along with other context-specific information, and adaptive expertise.

- Creating classroom spaces where students feel that their identities are safe requires a commitment to equity and a willingness and capacity to examine one's own assumptions, biases, and beliefs.

- The relational and social aspects of learning should be recognized, cultivated, and used as a lever for equity.

- Teachers can create classroom structures and routines (conditions) that demonstrate (or don't) a belief in students' capabilities to think, learn, and do.

- When students set authentic learning goals for themselves and pursue these goals, they become more invested in receiving and using feedback.

- Giving high-quality, useful feedback is a skill that students can develop and that has learning benefits for the giver and receiver of the feedback.

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 (2015) who observed, "Over the past ten years, educators have learned the distinction between summative and formative assessments" (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, career, and life. 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, career, and life will require "much more than content knowledge and foundational skills in reading and mathematics" (Conley, 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 youth will help students engage in what they are learning and have ample opportunity to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions to engage successfully with complexity. Standardized assessments neither teach nor measure such skills. Therefore, to help students be well prepared to succeed in college, career, and life, 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 organizations—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. The grantees featured in this and other memos in this series 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.

The Collective Feedback Tool Facilitates Opportunities for Learning

Use of the Collective Feedback Tool (CFT) first led LPS to realize that there are social dimensions to the practice of giving and receiving feedback and that teachers need to understand these social dimensions and be able to create safe spaces in the classroom where students can authentically engage in meaningful feedback practices. The Collective Feedback Tool (CFT) is a digital tool that LPS developed to facilitate the giving and receiving of peer-to-peer feedback. It draws upon UCLA's calibrated peer review[2] and Eric Mazur's (2008) ideas about peer instruction for active learning in order to provide a way for teachers to monitor the quality of feedback given and received by students. The CFT enables a teacher to collect and organize students' class work and submitted feedback in a digital database that facilitates comparisons between a student's feedback and a teacher's potentially more expert feedback on a given assignment. Using the CFT, a teacher

can also more easily monitor the quality of feedback that students give one another. With this information, a teacher can ensure that each student receives accurate and useful feedback from his/her peers. The CFT also can help a teacher to see how well students can evaluate a work sample along particular dimensions (as delineated on a task rubric). Knowing the quality of a student's feedback can help a teacher determine how well students understand what constitutes high-quality work on a given assignment. In addition, the opportunity for students to calibrate their feedback against more expert feedback can help them internalize the criteria for producing quality work and, presumably, help raise the overall quality of feedback that students provide to one another, which may in turn help more students improve their performance.

An Instance of Using the CFT

A science teacher introduced the CFT to her ninth-grade biology students. She had them use the tool to provide feedback on a paragraph about photosynthesis. Students were given two different paragraphs and the Reasoning with Evidence Rubric. (See Exhibit 1 on the following page.) Students were asked to evaluate the quality of each paragraph according to the criteria on the rubric. The rubric had three dimensions: claim, evidence, and reasoning. Students were given class time to read the paragraphs and evaluate each along these three dimensions. Each dimension included specific criteria along a three-point scale. For instance, the criteria to score a three (the highest score) on the reasoning dimension read: "Provides reasoning that clearly and accurately links the evidence to the claim. Includes appropriate and sufficient scientific principles." After students scored the paragraphs and individually entered their scores into the CFT, the teacher saw at once how many students scored each dimension the same way she had. She could also see which dimensions the students most frequently

scored incorrectly. The teacher showed this data to the students so they could see how their individual feedback compared to hers and to their peers. Most students accurately identified the claims that were made about photosynthesis. However, only a few students were able to accurately assess the quality of reasoning in each paragraph.

Feedback Data Can Inform Teaching and Learning

Information about students' capabilities to assess various dimensions of task performance can inform teaching decisions and, in so doing, contribute to student learning. Teachers can more readily see patterns in the content and/or skills students do not understand and, perhaps, the nature of their misunderstanding. However, the data organized within the CFT does not tell a teacher how to provide additional instruction or what strategic practice is needed so that students will learn that content or master those skills.

Feedback data can also be used to pair students. At LPS, teachers who used the CFT to facilitate a peer feedback process often assigned students to give feedback to several peers. With multiple sources of feedback, each student can more easily see patterns in the feedback he/she receives, and students get more practice giving feedback on a particular task. The digital platform also makes the logistics of distributing student work samples to multiple students a relatively quick and easy process for the teacher. Additionally, over time, the teacher can see which students are improving the quality of their feedback along particular dimensions, such as reasoning with evidence. If a student continues to struggle with a particular dimension, the teacher can intervene to provide more targeted instruction to that student.

Exhibit 1: Reasoning with Evidence Rubric

	Proficient 3	Approaching 2	Developing 1
Claim	Makes a relevant and complete claim that is specific and clear. Answers the CER focus question.	Makes a relevant but incomplete claim that may or may not answer the CER focus question.	Does not make a claim, or makes an inaccurate claim or claim is not connected to the CER focus question.
Evidence	Provides appropriate and sufficient evidence to support claim (clear, detailed, relevant). Evidence from data table(s), graph(s), or prior knowledge used.	Provides appropriate, but insufficient (not enough) evidence to support claim (somewhat clear, not enough detail). May include some inappropriate evidence.	Does not provide evidence, or only provides inappropriate evidence (evidence that does not support claim or is unclear).
Reasoning	Provides reasoning that clearly and accurately links the evidence to the claim. Includes appropriate and sufficient scientific principles. All key terms are appropriately used and include in the CER.	Provides reasoning that links the evidence to the claim. Reasoning may lack clarity or accuracy. Repeats the evidence and/or includes some scientific principles, but not enough to justify the claim. Some key terms are appropriately used and included in the CER.	Does not provide reasoning, or only provides reasoning that does not link the evidence to the claim. Some/no key terms are used and included in the CER statement or terms are included but used inappropriately.

Source: Adapted from McNeill & Martin, 2011.

Giving Feedback that Motivates and Educates

While the CFT facilitated aspects of the peer feedback process and could be used to illuminate the quality of feedback students give to each other, the tool could not make each student feel safe enough to share his or her work with peers in the first place. An administrator explained, "If you ask a student, who could be coming from any number of different contexts, to share his/her work, to have others give feedback on it, or to give feedback to others, [you have created a situation] where anxiety can be generated based on a student's identity." Students, especially adolescents, can often feel vulnerable. When students face negative stereotypes about their group's intellectual capacities, as many students of color in schools do, they experience a phenomenon known as stereotype threat. Claude Steele has described stereotype threat as a "situational predicament" when people's "performance could confirm a bad view of their group and of themselves, as members of the group" (2010, p. 59). In such situations, receiving feedback or participating in a formative assessment process, no matter how thoughtfully designed, will probably not be sufficient for a student to overcome the psychological threat of performing poorly in that situation. Recall that many students at LPS arrive at the school with an uncomfortable and antagonistic relationship with the institution of school. Under the best of circumstances, providing students with feedback that both educates and motivates is a difficult undertaking, which becomes more challenging when giving feedback to students from non-dominant groups who may "face negative stereotypes about their group's intellectual capacities," as described by researchers Geoffrey Cohen, Claude Steele, and Lee Ross (1999, p. 1302). Rife with challenges, this circumstance is what Cohen, Steele, and Ross call the "mentor's dilemma"—knowing how to provide feedback that motivates and educates.

At LPS, administrators and teachers asked students about their experiences with feedback. As they listened to students, they recognized this challenging circumstance. One administrator said, "stereotype threats exacerbate a sense of belonging uncertainty and, despite our initial efforts [with the CFT], we realized we needed to find a way to marry the technical challenge of teaching the skills of giving and receiving feedback…with the more adaptive challenge of how [to make giving and receiving feedback] safe so all students can participate." Furthermore, a different LPS leader explained the importance of developing the awareness and capacity of the adults in the Network to notice situations when students do not, or may not, feel safe: "If [teachers] don't really know how to notice when power, unequal status, and that power and privilege are getting in the way of learning [for students], then they really don't have a chance to be the teacher they want to be." LPS recognized that teachers needed to raise their own equity consciousness and form strong relationships with their students in order to develop classroom cultures where each student felt valued, known, and recognized for his/her individual strengths. Consequently, engaging in peer feedback as a practice to support learning and to reduce entrenched inequities required information beyond what the CFT could provide; it required teachers to know their students and the social context of the classroom.

Establishing a Sense of Belonging and Identity-Safe Spaces in the Classroom

To maximize students' capacity for learning, students need to learn in classrooms where their identities are safe. Learning from the work of Dorothy Steele and Becki Cohn-Vargas (2013), who outlined a set of identity-safe teaching practices, LPS

educated teachers about the concept of identity safety. LPS offered its teachers this description of identity-safe classrooms:

> **Identity safe classrooms** are those in which teachers strive to ensure that **students feel that their social identity is an *asset*** rather than a barrier to *success* in the classroom, and that they are **welcomed, supported,** and **valued** whatever their background. [Bold and italics in original.]

In Network-wide professional development sessions, teachers explored this concept and were asked to consider their own social identities. LPS anchored its development of teachers' adaptive knowledge in efforts to help teachers use identity-safe teaching practices—such as making teaching child-centered, cultivating diversity as a resource, and establishing classrooms as caring environments (Steele & Cohen-Vargas, 2013, p. 7). LPS teachers approached the goal of creating identity-safe classrooms in their own way. Examples below describe how three teachers, teaching in different contexts, intertwined their technical and adaptive knowledge in order to create identity-safe classroom spaces where students could seek out and use feedback as an opportunity to learn.

Developing Individual Learning Goals in a Newcomer Class Serves Equity

Lily taught English language to newcomers, students who had recently arrived in the United States and did not speak any English.[3] As newcomers to the US, her students shared a common bond, which helped unite them. Lily also intentionally developed an authentic sense of community in her classroom where students were encouraged to support each other. Lily's goal was to get her students' "confidence in English as high as possible as soon as possible" so that the following year they could be integrated into regular classes.[4]

Establishing a Sense of Belonging and Connection

To help students feel supported and to support each other, Lily explained, "We spend a lot of time at the start of the year talking about who we are, and why we're here, and why we're in this class. And, I try to find little ways each week that we get to celebrate each other." For example, students wrote anonymous "pride notes" to each other where they jotted down something they were proud of a classmate for doing. When students received their notes, they read them out loud. Writing and hearing the pride notes became a routine for establishing relationships and belonging in Lily's class.

Lily also created various ways for students to keep track of their progress, and they frequently set learning goals for themselves. Lily did this without using technology or the CFT. She avoided technology because a lot of her students had no experience using computers and because the omnipresent Google Translator made it tempting for non-English speaking students to rely on the automatic translate device. Students kept portfolios and, at the end of each unit, were asked to look back at their work to see how they had grown in the four language domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Students were asked to select a work sample that they were most proud of and set an individual learning goal for the next unit.

Going on Tour as a Way to Identify Learning Goals

Mid-year, Lily engaged her students in an activity she called Going on Tour. This experience, she said, led to a "big shift" in how students thought about their English language learning goals. Students "toured" several classes that they would attend the following year, such as biology or history. These classes were conducted entirely in English. Lily expected her

students to take observation notes about the speaking, listening, reading, and writing activities that occurred in the classes they visited. Students used a simple note-taker to record their observations in either their home language, which was Spanish, or in English. At the end of the tour, they came back together and Lily led a collective debrief of what they noticed and what they now understood they would need to know how to do next year. After this experience, students set specific language goals that they wanted to work on for the remainder of the year. Goals typically included practicing reading from a textbook, writing essays, and giving formal presentations. Through this experience, Lily said, "[Students] set their own path [based on] what they're seeing and what they want to be working towards." By going on tour students experienced firsthand what school would expect of them the following year. The visits had the added benefit of reminding next year's teachers that they would also need to prepare for the newcomer students who would be in their class. Through this experience designed for her particular learners, Lily created the conditions for students to assess their current level of language performance and then co-construct learning goals that informed the design of future learning activities. Students were excited and motivated to participate in these activities because they saw a connection between those tasks and what they wanted and needed to learn.

Keeping Students' Identities Safe Requires Vigilant Attention

Another LPS teacher, Miguel, described the importance of building strong, caring relationships with students from the first day of class and continuing to cultivate these relationships. Students didn't arrive in his Spanish class ready to trust him. Miguel explained, many students "arrive [at LPS] with an antagonistic relationship to school that is not their fault."

Previously, school and society had categorized and unfairly judged them. Furthermore, because many of his students "think they know Spanish already, they [wonder], Why am I here?" in this class. So, Miguel orchestrated a series of learning activities that began on the first day of class designed to develop respectful relationships with him, with the subject matter, and between the students. He began with a language game he called The Burrito Lesson. He selected half a dozen common Spanish words, like burrito, taco, Chihuahua, and señorita that everyone knew. In addition to these words, he made cards with different definitions and asked students to match the Spanish word with its definition(s). What many students didn't know was that each of these common Spanish words has multiple meanings. For instance, Chihuahua is not only a breed of dog but also a state in Mexico and can be an expression of surprise or anger. Students had fun with this activity. Miguel also told students jokes in Spanish and used the jokes as a vehicle for learning double meanings and expressions. These activities also provided a foundation for developing writing skills in Spanish, a skill that was often underdeveloped and made some students feel inferior.

When a Focus on Evaluation Gets in the Way of Learning

Miguel described how challenging it was to engage students in looking critically at elements of their own writing. For instance, after students had written an introduction to an essay, he wanted students to re-read their own introductions to look for missing elements, but, he said, "The students didn't want to do it." They thought the purpose of looking at their work was to correct and grade it, which in their minds was the teacher's job. Furthermore, the students seemed to believe that if they identified any missing elements in their introductions, they would

be helping their teacher find errors that he might otherwise have overlooked. The more errors, the lower the grade. From the students' perspective, evaluating their own work had no benefits. When Miguel asked them what they thought about participating in self-assessment and peer feedback, they told him, "That's your job. That's why you're here. Check what's missing and tell us, so we can correct it." Through conversations with his students, Miguel observed that they primarily did their assignments to get grades. This observation made him wonder how grading student's work "shapes the way that [students] think about learning." Miguel wanted to disrupt this transactional relationship between producing work and receiving a grade. He wanted to engender a different mindset in his students in which they would look critically at their own writing in order to learn how to strengthen it. He decided to try engaging his students in giving peer-to-peer feedback as a strategy to get students to focus on learning in and from assignments.

Peer-to-Peer Feedback in Service of Equity Poses Adaptive Challenges

Prior to introducing peer-to-peer feedback, Miguel talked with his students about the feedback process. The students told him that they thought giving their peers feedback was no good "because a person that doesn't know anything" can't provide help. Such comments signaled that his students did not feel safe enough to be vulnerable with each other or to reveal their understanding gaps. Miguel counseled his students that learning would occur from closely reading other students' papers no matter the quality and from conversing with classmates purposefully about specific elements of writing. He explained that giving and receiving feedback was also an important skill to develop, one that they would undoubtedly need in their future jobs.

On the day Miguel first engaged students in doing peer-to-peer feedback, he was reminded how much was at stake for each student. He recounted a challenge that arose on that first day. A few students had not felt good about their feedback experience. He said one student, Carla, was "kind of mean." When Carla was asked to give feedback on the best part of a peer's written introduction, she said loudly so others could hear, "What am I supposed to say? Do you want me to lie?" Miguel thought Carla wanted people to hear her. Miguel went over to her right away, but in that moment he was not prepared for her attitude. After school, he found her in the hallway and discussed the incident. He was careful not to admonish her but rather to try and understand her frame of mind and motivation. Carla said, "I was trying to be honest, to be real. And, everything [with the introduction] was wrong." As Miguel listened, he realized that engaging students like Carla in giving peer-to-peer feedback in a way that would aid learning was not a role that was at all familiar or even seemed "real" to her.

Miguel Adapts to the Situation and Keeps the Focus on Learning

Upon reflecting on this incident and his conversation with Carla, Miguel realized that some students, like Carla, viewed their peer feedback role as one of evaluator rather than non-judgmental observer whose job was to provide a description of what the writer's words helped the observer (the reader) see, the feelings the words evoked, and perhaps also identify missing details or information. Miguel had wanted his students to read each other's introductions and provide feedback with an anthropologist's eye. He said, "I thought the role [of feedback-giver] could benefit the giver…because [the giver] would need to make sure he/she was clear about the different parts [of an introduction]." Miguel realized that some of his students still needed to discover

the learning value of careful observation and engaging in feedback conversations with a peer. He knew he needed to help some students, like Carla, become willing participants in that process. Establishing an identity-safe classroom environment in a high school where students are not necessarily receptive to assuming new roles or do not have an open stance to learning, or when a student won't engage in a learning experience the way the teacher intended, are challenging situations for a teacher. These situations require adaptive moves and an equity consciousness. In such situations, teachers can feel like their authority is being challenged. Miguel, who said he pays constant attention to "how students are experiencing the process of learning," did not judge his student, but rather gathered information. He tried to find out more about how Carla was feeling and what had motivated her actions. He let her know her comments were hurtful if the writer overheard them. With Carla's permission, he intended to explore and discuss Carla's situation with the class the next day. Miguel's response to this difficult situation was adaptive and patient and oriented to learning. He understood that Carla would eventually need to change some of her habits and beliefs in order to learn in and from peer feedback. He understood this would take time and convincing. Meanwhile, he knew he would need to keep adjusting to the dynamic classroom environment while he kept re-orienting his students and himself to recognize and seize their opportunities to learn.

Receiving Meaningful Peer-to-Peer Feedback in a Socratic Seminar

In an Advanced Placement Spanish Literature Class at LPS, the learning context was different from Lily's and Miguel's. It afforded other opportunities for teacher Maria to make her classroom a safe place for her students to learn. Maria described a conversation she had with a student who had done poorly on a multiple-choice assessment about a poem.

During Maria's conversation with this student, she discovered that the student knew and understood the poem well. "It was clear…she had done the work; she had put in the cognitive effort, but it just wasn't translating" to the multiple-choice test. Maria wanted to establish other structures and practices in her class where students could demonstrate what they knew.

Maria introduced a "fishbowl" style Socratic Seminar. Socratic Seminars are a structure in which students are responsible for facilitating a group discussion, usually about ideas in a text. By asking questions of one another, they help each other understand important ideas. In Maria's fishbowl Socratic Seminar, there was an inner and an outer circle of students. The students in the inner circle were the discussants of a topic connected to the unit of study. The primary task of students in the outer ring was to observe their peer partner in the inner ring and provide their partner with feedback on the specific goal the partner had set for him/herself. Maria borrowed this idea from a colleague and adapted the fishbowl structure to meet the particular learning needs of students in her class who were performing the least well. Typically, these were the students who struggled to initiate conversations or to jump into a conversation and elaborate upon others' ideas.

Maria used the fishbowl structure to support her students in three ways. First, she made all students aware of the importance of inviting others into the conversation; this became a dimension on the Socratic Seminar rubric. Maria discovered that quiet students were more inclined to engage in the conversation when their peers invited them to participate and asked them to contribute. She said these students seemed "to feel seen in a different way." Second, Maria had students individually identify a specific goal or learning intention to work on during the Socratic Seminar, such as using transition words, speaking up more during the discussion, or marshaling evidence

more effectively to make a point. Third, she let students select their own peer feedback partner. Students chose classmates with whom they felt comfortable.

Socratic Seminars occurred at the end of each unit. There were two rotations of the seminar during a class period, so each student experienced giving and receiving feedback. Midway through a seminar, Maria stopped the discussion that was underway and directed discussants to do a quick feedback check-in with their partner. Partners were expected to share what was working and not working with respect to the discussant's goal. Maria said she heard students make encouraging comments to their partners like: "I love how you are doing ___" or "I need you to do ___ more." Such feedback elicited responses like: "Oh, you are right. I'm actually not using evidence like I thought I was" or "I haven't spoken up yet." Receiving feedback mid-way through the conversation, Maria said, gave discussants an opportunity to return to the seminar conversation and try to apply the feedback right away. Maria's adaptations to the traditional Socratic Seminar enabled her to develop a structure with embedded routines that encouraged students to direct their own learning, much like the newcomers in Lily's class. Maria's students selected something about their Spanish they wanted to strengthen. The feedback mechanisms she developed gave each student an opportunity to get better at the goal he/she set.

Generating New Capacities in Order to Achieve Equity

Lily, Miguel, and Maria each developed classroom structures and routines that fit their specific contexts. Their stories offer examples of various identity-safe teaching practices that helped establish classrooms where students seemed to feel like they belonged. The teachers developed genuine caring relationships with their students, helped them develop supportive relationships with each other, and figured out ways to help each student make learning purposeful. While each teacher approached this task differently, each demonstrated respect for students as capable learners, thinkers, and doers. Miguel repeatedly engaged his students in conversations about their beliefs about peer feedback, with the expectation that he (and they) would learn something. Each teacher also worked with his/her students to create structures and routines that gave the students control over what and how they were learning. The actual structures and routines, such as going on tour or participating in a fishbowl Socratic Seminar, differed. Peer-to-peer feedback became a mechanism in each of these classrooms that ultimately contributed to students' sense of belonging and provided meaningful opportunities to learn. However, the manner in which the peer-to-peer feedback occurred differed in each classroom. Interestingly, each of these three teachers engaged students in respectful and purposeful peer-to-peer feedback routines that did not use the CFT. The stories of what these teachers did can be seen, perhaps, as different ways to create the conditions for equity-centered learning to take place. Establishing such settings is the means for creating the conditions in which peer-to-peer feedback practices are more likely to lead to learning that will make equitable educational outcomes more possible.

Related Challenges Worth Considering

Developing feedback practices that genuinely lead to more equitable opportunities for learning for each student requires shedding certain entrenched ways of doing things. For example, teachers may need to create more opportunities for students to set their own learning goals, and they may need to design more opportunities for learning that "counts" even if students do not receive grades on

those opportunities. Institutions may also need to discard approaches that they spent time developing or pivot in a new direction as LPS did with the CFT. In order to create classroom environments where each student feels like he/she/they belongs and does not face stereotype threats, educators will also have to examine their own beliefs, biases, and assumptions and be willing to take a critical look at how their practices may advantage some students while disadvantaging others. Honest and critical self-examination is never easy. This is why one LPS leader, when asked what she was most proud of about her Assessment for Learning work, said she was proud of "the courage and the willingness to deal with this super vulnerable and challenging task of investigating identity."

In order for teachers to be able to create such safe spaces for students in their classrooms, they, too, need spaces to participate in conversations about race, racism, and their identities. Leaders in schools have a responsibility to make sure that those conversations are educative and motivating and do not alienate or do harm. As one LPS leader said, "It is not enough to have high expectations for all students and believe that everyone can learn. It actually involves working with ourselves…to focus on [our] culture and to learn how to talk about [racism] and work through issues that are about race and class and gender as they arise." It requires adults learning how to provide feedback to one another (and to students) across racial divides—feedback that educates and motivates. Creating learning spaces where students feel they belong also means listening attentively to what students say and closely watching how students experience the learning activities, the way Miguel described doing, in order to discover what further adjustments are needed so each student's response to the activity is considered, valued, and better understood. When students

do not value (and are critical of) adult efforts to help them learn, it is often easier to dismiss or condemn the students' reactions rather than seek first to understand them.

Another significantly difficult challenge in this endeavor to develop assessment practices that contribute to equity is finding the courage to examine one's own or one's institutional shortcomings honestly. Doing so and being willing to expose those shortcomings and then enlist the support of others to help make progress toward resolving or remedying them is the mark of an adaptive leader. As Heifetz also indicated, leaders and organizations need to be able to tolerate the losses that come with such recognitions. At LPS, the investment in the CFT did not play out as initially imagined. However, through the Network's intentional use of the CFT, enormous learning occurred, learning that its leaders used to reorient the organization to continue learning, to raise its equity consciousness, and to mobilize the Network to discover how to use formative assessment practices to dismantle inequities and propel learning for everyone.

Reflection Questions

The reflection questions are intended to spark consideration about how to develop peer-to-peer feedback practices in classrooms that genuinely enable each student to learn and about the extent to which such efforts disrupt (or replicate) existing systems of advantage.

- The teachers highlighted in this memo each sought to establish classroom environments where students felt that their social identity was an asset and where they felt welcomed, supported, and valued no matter what their background. At your school, what classroom practices help your students belong and feel valued? How are students' identities affirmed? How and in what ways do teachers value and support every student equally regardless of their background?

- At LPS, teachers like Lily and Maria established (and adapted) structures, routines, and feedback practices to create classroom conditions in which students set their own learning goals and gave each other relevant feedback on their performance toward those goals. At your school what structures, routines, and feedback practices do teachers use to help students set meaningful learning goals for themselves and then work toward achieving them?

- Teachers, like Miguel, Maria, and the science teacher intentionally designed peer feedback routines as occasions for learning and provided students with feedback on the quality of their feedback. At your school, how do students give each other feedback? What classroom conditions support students to use and learn from feedback? Are there other practices that, if used in your classrooms, would allow each student to make greater use of feedback?

Endnotes

1. Education Data Partnership retrieved from https://www.ed-data.org/school/Contra-Costa/West-Contra-Costa-Unified/Leadership-Public-Schools_Col_-Richmond

2. See http://cpr.molsci.ucla.edu/ for more information.

3. All proper names of individuals are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

4. LPS also continued to support newcomer students' home language and culture.

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