Communicating Learning Goals and Success Criteria with Students

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Learning Goals focus students' attention on what it is they are to learn, as opposed to the task they are to complete. They enable students to know what they are learning and why. Success Criteria help students monitor their learning during the course of the lesson, so they can make adjustments to move their learning forward. Learning Goals and Success Criteria address a core objective of formative assessment, which is to involve students in the management of their own learning.
Learning Goals and Success Criteria provide a critical tool for students to understand where they are in their learning and to clarify for themselves which next steps they need to take. Learning Goals and Success Criteria give students the tools to actually DO the learning. This is a first and critical step to help students shift from being passive recipients of learning to being active participants in the learning process.

In his seminal paper on formative assessment, Royce Sadler stressed that to be able to monitor their own learning students must come to hold a conception of quality similar to the teacher's, and that developing this conception depends on:

- Possessing a concept of the standard (or goal, or reference level) being aimed for;
- Comparing the actual (or current) level of performance with the standard; and
- Engaging in appropriate action, which leads to some closure of the gap (Sadler, 1989, p. 120).

Notice that Sadler refers to students' "possessing a concept of the goal." In practice, what is meant by this is not just that teachers post the goal on the classroom whiteboard, but that students have a clear understanding of what the goal and the Success Criteria entail.

When teachers communicate the Learning Goals and Success Criteria, it is essential that they spend time discussing what they mean. Once the students know what is expected, they are better able to monitor their learning, know how they are progressing, and take action to move forward when they need to. There are several ways to engage students in understanding the Success Criteria, which are highlighted below.

Sharing Success Criteria with Students

A first step in helping students understand the Success Criteria is to have a discussion with students so that everyone knows what is expected. Teachers support these discussions by:

- Communicating Learning Goals and Success Criteria to students in language that is appropriate to the student's level.
- Sharing examples of student work and show how it relates to the Success Criteria. Make sure the student work is from another class, so that no students are singled out. This strategy can be used to show work that demonstrates the Success Criteria, work that does not meet the criteria, and to provide justification for quality work.
- Reviewing with students what they have done in earlier lessons on the same topic and clarify how the new Success Criteria move them forward from their current understanding of the topic.

Co-Constructing Success Criteria with Students

When co-constructing Success Criteria, students and teachers work together to write the Success Criteria that will be used in a lesson. Students benefit from co-constructing Success Criteria because it helps them internalize the criteria, so they can make use of them while they are learning.

Here are several suggestions for how to co-construct criteria:

- **Demonstrating a skill** - The teacher can demonstrate a specific skill and asks students, "What did I just do?" as a way of gathering the criteria;

- **Demonstrating good and bad** - Demonstrate how to do the skill well and how to do it poorly, and ask students to identify key features of a successful performance;
- **Working through it** - Analyzing a graph or diagram and discussing what helps interpret it to pull out its elements;
- **Sloppy Success Criteria** - Provide students with a piece of work that contains errors, along with the Success Criteria, and ask them what has gone wrong? They analyze the errors and put the Success Criteria right.

Students can be part of the assessment process; when they understand the indicators, they can use them to monitor their own learning. Learning Goals and Success Criteria focus students' attention on learning and enable them, in Sadler's terms, to compare the actual (or current) level of performance with the Learning Goal. A key practice in formative assessment is to ensure that students understand the goal and criteria and have a clear picture of what they mean. *Successful implementation of formative assessment hinges on these foundational planning elements*.