HILARY JOHANNES' FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT LEARNING JOURNEY

Learning Journey

In March 2019 the WestEd team had the fortune to sit down with Hilary Johannes, an ELA teacher at Hamilton High School in Chandler, Arizona, to hear about her experience learning and implementing formative assessment over the last few years. Her journey in formative assessment is familiar – she starts out by trying to get a handle on all the new thinking, processes, and terminology of formative assessment and, as she gained expertise, she wonders how to communicate this change with students and involve them in the process. Hilary's story is notable in how she embraces continuous learning and curiosity, and how she partners with students to develop a specific area of focus each year to propel her formative assessment practice (and, her students' practice) to the next level.

When you read her interview, you'll notice how she describes setting an intention for her practice each year and then enacting it within a process of inquiry. Her process includes using regular noticing and sensemaking to gauge how the work is going, then adjusting and advancing her practice based on new information.

Year 1 - Getting a Handle on Formative Assessment

During that first year, I was just digesting all the new information. There was a lot to process, even trying to really think about, what is a Success Criteria? What are Learning Goals? The first year was very much just about orienting myself to this new way of thinking, and it was definitely a long process that first year. During this time, I was transitioning from the way I used to do things in class to this new idea with formative assessment. My main focus was just identifying the Success Criteria. How do I know, and how do students know, what needs to be demonstrated to be successful? And then, how could students give and receive feedback.

Year 2 - Engaging Students Through Peer Feedback and Self-Assessment

At the end of that first year, in the last module, there were videos that we were able to watch with some different strategies, and I identified one strategy in a video that I saw and I thought, "Okay, I can implement that in my English class." It's called warm and cool feedback, and I saw that as a direct strategy that I could start right away. I could tie it in with the writing that we do in class with the students. So the second year when I was implementing that strategy, that was the one strategy I focused on. I wanted to practice it again, and again, and again so that I better understood how it worked.

I also worked with the students to practice this because it required trust in a pair situation. They are viewing another person's work and they're giving warm and cool feedback. Warm feedback is showing another student the skills that they're successful in based on the evidence

they present. The cool feedback is done in the form of question strategies, so you're not telling your partner how to fix or what to fix, but you're prompting them to look at areas of weakness and then asking questions to guide them to make decisions on how to fix it.

Once I saw how successful it was, I also started to use the process myself. I changed the way I give feedback. When a final writing product would be done, I actually took the Success Criteria and I gave students warm and cool feedback based on that Success Criteria. And I was able to give more effective feedback, I think, as a result of that. I was able to do it more quickly. It also gave the students somewhere to go if they needed to make improvements, because I posed questions in the cool feedback for them, which was something they were getting used to. That allowed them opportunities to think about additional ways to improve.

Year 3 - Deepening the Student Role Through Co-Creating Success Criteria

A really strong transitional point came in year three. In our professional learning, we were pushed to come up with an inquiry question, something that we felt passionate about that we wanted to focus on more in our classrooms. That really was a game changer for me, because it took me several months to come up with the question. I would write and rewrite, talk to others. The question that I ended up settling on was, "How can I support alternate forms of learning?" That really opened up everything for me once I had that inquiry question. In my class, we began to identify Success Criteria together, and then students were able to plan with me how they could demonstrate the Success Criteria in a wide variety of different ways. And I supported that. Some of my students are visual learners, some are more verbal, some prefer more written expression. So they actually were able to create options of how to demonstrate their learning and to do the Success Criteria.

That inquiry question also allowed more equity of learning with my students, because they're able to choose for themselves how they demonstrate reaching the Learning Goals with Success Criteria in a way that's equitable. We talked about, "If I'm going to show my knowledge in a visual way versus how you show it in a written way, what are the Success Criteria that are reasonable expectations for whatever option we choose?" And so that equity element really came into play through my inquiry question. The students were able to take ownership of their learning. And I talked to them about that. They really valued that opportunity by doing it even more this year. We've had discussions about how they value the opportunity to have some control and ownership of their learning, because they're able to make choices.

I've seen deeper learning, deeper knowledge as a result of that option of choice. I've seen them become a community of learners, where they actually support each other in giving and receiving feedback.

Year 4 - Advancing the Learning Culture Through Risk Taking and a Growth Mindset

This is my fourth year. I've been calling it my year of risk taking, which formative work has allowed me to do. I feel freer to take risks. If something doesn't work, that's fine; we'll figure that out and

we'll fix that. And so my risk taking this year has been, "How do I engage students with the Success Criteria in every single thing that I do?" I hadn't done that before, so that's my focus this year.

At the beginning of the year, we were working on projects in the first quarter, and I was introducing them to the idea of Success Criteria. They were able to identify what it took to be successful, but they couldn't actually implement that. So there was a lot of struggle and frustration at the beginning of the year. So we talked about, "Well, why did they struggle? And what was going on?" The students said that yes, they could identify what it meant to be successful, but until they went through the process of trying to demonstrate success, they didn't really understand what that meant. So even though they struggled and failed in some of those criteria, they saw it as a valuable process. As the year went on and we continued to work with Success Criteria, they understood more of what it actually meant to demonstrate meeting a Learning goal, and they became more confident.

Next Steps

Next year I want to work to refine what I've been doing this year. How I introduce the Success Criteria and all of that, but I'm also very interested in multiple ways to gather data, to gather information on a day-to-day basis. Because I sometimes feel like that can be overwhelming, just having so many students. What are effective ways, on a day-to-day basis, for me to gather that information so that then I can move forward and make the decisions that need to be made to support that? That's going to be my focus for next year: how I try new things or maybe enhance ways already that I collect data, and just become more solid on that on a day-to-day basis.

I also have questions about how often to collect data. Do I need to gather data every single day? Do I need to gather it every couple of days? What's the right amount for them and for me? That's my question for next year. So far, the way I've structured things, I'm giving students feedback throughout the week, but I want them to give feedback to each other.

I also wonder, how do I involve the students so that it's not laborious for them, but that there's some efficient way where they can keep track of their learning? At the beginning of the year, I actually started something with a learning log, I actually had them bring in a binder where they could keep track of their learning. But I found, on a day-to-day basis, that to be cumbersome. So that's what caused me to start thinking, "Okay, next year I really want to think about how can I engage the students in that work, but not in a way that takes so much time that isn't effective."

Supporting Shifts

Classroom Culture

The whole first quarter, and even in the second quarter, we are working on developing a trusting classroom culture to make formative assessment possible. One of the things that I always do is include *The Odyssey* and then *Romeo and Juliet* in the first quarter. I have them work in small teams to demonstrate their learning. With *Romeo and Juliet*, they actually have to act out scenes together. That pushes them out of their comfort zones, because they have to work together if

they are going to present it in front of the class. I also talk a lot about how we are here to support each other, and that we are a community. I talk about that a lot because that's always been important to me, just as a teacher, but I really see how powerful that culture and community is.

You have to have that in order to do a lot of the formative work, because if they don't trust each other, they're not going to be able to give and receive effective feedback. They're not going to be able to grow as much as they can if they don't trust each other...And if the team is successful, that's great. If they're not successful, we figure out how we can move forward so that the teams are more successful, and that they can trust, and they can build that community that way.

Student Learner Identity

Students also became stronger in their willingness and ability to persevere, because I gave them permission to make mistakes. They made mistakes, but realized it's not the end of the world. They can improve, they can grow, they can do it again. And once they trusted me enough to realize that I say that, and I mean that, and I allow that, they grew in their confidence and their perseverance a lot. Even by the end of the first quarter, I saw a dramatic change.

Now if I ask them to do something again, they understand it's because it's an opportunity for them to grow. They've developed a growth mindset that a lot of them did not have at the beginning of the year. They were very tied to grades, and I'm seeing shifts and changes in that where even if they earn a low score the first time around, they know they have the opportunity to improve. And they value that. I have definitely seen that change in them.

Student Agency

One of the things that I make a lot more time for now, because of formative assessment, is I make time for student reflection. I have 150 students, and so I ask my students to reflect on things. How has your ability to give and receive feedback advanced, and how does that help you as a learner? And how does your ability to have choice impact you as a learner?

At the beginning of the year, they all said that they're too afraid to give and receive feedback, they didn't want to insult each other, they didn't feel open to taking constructive criticism. But by December, in their reflections, they were valuing the feedback from their peers. They saw it as an opportunity to look at other work and compare it with their own. That they could handle Success Criteria, and they knew what it meant to be successful. So I've seen a huge growth curve in these students from the beginning of the year. It takes time and effort on their part, and on my part, to get to that point. At first they didn't trust each other, and now they do, and now they're able to manage their learning so much more successfully.

Equity

I think one way I feel like I've been able to reach more students in my classroom is because I've been able to offer choice in how they demonstrate mastery of Success Criteria. Another way I think I've done it is because I allow them to redo something as many times as is necessary in

order to show growth and skills. That takes a lot of fear away from the students, because they realize it's okay to make a mistake and that they can grow and improve.

My students, they're ninth-graders, they're in high school, they're very scheduled. Their days are very, very full. And so if I want to make what I do in my class meaningful, then I need to bring them into the process in some way. By allowing them to choose how they demonstrate reaching the Learning Goals, that really allows me to reach every student in a way that's individualized for them because they get to choose how they demonstrate their learning. I'm actually providing more individualized learning than I've ever been able to before by using formative assessment. Even though I have 150 students, I'm still able to offer individualization in how they learn and how they move forward.

What's Different in my Classroom

Success Criteria Drives Readiness to Learn

I also have changed how I assess student learning. I don't give multiple choice tests, or things like traditional assessments anymore. I do a lot of assessment through Socratic seminar discussions. I do a lot of assessment that includes giving students the opportunity to present their learning in different ways. And so, for example, in the Socratic seminars, in order to hit the Success Criteria for that discussion, they have to have completed the reading. They have to be prepared to make higher level connections. They have to be prepared to make connections beyond the text, because we talk about the Success Criteria ahead of time.

They come in knowing what it means to be successful, and they're able to support each other's success because somebody will say something really great, and then somebody else can add to that and then make a new inference, or make another connection. So it does allow every student to show attainment of skill, and it allows them to support each other in that process.

Teachers and Students as Partners in Learning

Another important part of this process for me has been that I've been very open with my students that I am learning, that we are going to try new things together, and that I value their feedback. And I get great feedback from them. I'm able to put aside, this is not a perfect lesson. If they have criticism for it, it's because they know that I'm open to that.

My purpose is to make the lessons stronger, so I'm able to take the personal element out of that, which formative assessment has also helped me with. If it's not perfect, it's not a reflection of me as a teacher, it's that there are weaknesses and that I can work to improve just like they can. We work together, really, as a team. And they know that I value that part of this journey as much as anything else. I've really found that to be a wonderful connection with them.

Developing Students' Independent Skills Through Daily Modeling

It all takes a lot of modeling, especially with the cool feedback. They have to pose the questions, because that's what allows their partners to take ownership of their learning. If all they ever do is tell them how to fix and what to fix, the independence doesn't ever come. And so my second year

I really learned that. I observed that they really wanted to flip back into just telling their peer what to do. I really had to model again, again, again, you need to do it this way. There are benefits to this that you will see long-term. So by the end of the year we had the hang of it, but it took a lot of modeling because it's very different for them.

Students Drive the Process

Right now we're finishing up a unit of study where there were teams and students drove the process. I had a team leader, and a communicator, and all of that. Then based on our Success Criteria, they set daily goals for themselves to push themselves forward so that by the end, they would've hit all the Success Criteria.

That is something new that I am trying this year, that I did not do last year. I find that it's always a journey. I truly believe that this will energize and impact the rest of my teaching career. This is my 20th year teaching, I started this in year 17, but I just see how far I've come in four years, but also how far I have to go. I'm excited by that.