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Spotlight On...Formative Assessment:

Activating Students as Learning Resources for One Another

The formative assessment strategy of activating students as learning resources for one another provides another avenue for helping students improve their learning. Wiliam and Leahy (2015, p. 139) state, “Engaging students in assessing the work of their peers is not just a labor-saving device for teachers. Implemented properly, it can substantially increase student achievement, both for those who get the help from their peers, and peers who provide the help.” This formative assessment strategy not only supports learning in the short term by offering opportunities for students to obtain answers to questions and to obtain feedback, but it also teaches skills like collaboration, goal setting and conflict resolution which better prepare students for post-secondary study and the working world. Central to this strategy is the practice of cooperative learning which can lead to strong learning successes. Wiliam (2011) notes four key benefits of cooperative learning:

- **Motivation**—when well structured, students recognize that it is in their best interest to help others.
- **Social Capital**—students not only help peers because they care about them, but they care about their perceived value to others.
- **Personalized Learning**—students learn more because the assistance is focused on the specific need of the learner.
- **Increased Understanding**—to teach others, you have to understand an idea clearly. The stronger learner improves by reinforcing their understanding to teach a peer while the less component learning benefits from having a second teacher.

There are a number of useful peer learning techniques that support formative assessment. Like all formative assessment practices, teachers need to model practices and work with students to set clear success criteria for the application of the techniques. Here are a few techniques to encourage:

Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.

~Benjamin Franklin



Learning is more effective when it is an active rather than a passive process.

~Euripides

Talk Partners: Collaborative conversation between peers, as supported by John Hattie’s research on practices that positively impact student learning, is among one of the most beneficial with an effect size of 0.82 (Clarke, 2014). Shirley Clarke, a formative assessment expert, advocates for the use of “talk partners” in classrooms. In this model, students are paired in a variety of ways to engage in collaborative conversations in response to teacher-posed questions and discussion prompts. Instead of waiting to be called upon, all students are expected to think about and articulate their thinking with their partner. Pairings change throughout the school year. The technique leads to deeper student understanding and often results in better written responses. Learn more about [talk partners](#) from Shirley Clarke in this recent EdWeek Blog or through [case studies](#) she has conducted.

Checking for Understanding and Error Analysis: These two techniques work best with students working in cooperative groups. When **Checking for Understanding**, students are asked to generate questions they have about a topic of study, reading, assignment, etc. Students work as a group to answer the questions they can and then to advance the questions without answers to the teacher for guidance. This technique can be part of other collaborative conversation routines such as close readings, literature circles and Socratic seminars. During **Error Analysis**, students work in groups to fix errors in a solution, piece of writing or other final product.

Peer Feedback: When students co-construct success criteria and then work on helping each other apply that criteria to their own work, the quality of the work can be much stronger. Initially, it is best to start with an anonymous piece of student work with which students can practice learning to provide feedback without any emotional attachment. Establishing ground rules, [modeling the practice of offering feedback effectively and ineffectively](#) and offering sentence starters or [protocols for offering feedback](#) (e.g. 2 Stars and 1 Wish, Traffic Lights, etc.) are also helpful steps to take to guide students in their peer feedback abilities.

Works Cited:

Clarke, S. (2014). *Outstanding Formative Assessment: Culture and Practice*. Hodder Education: London.

William, D. (2011). *Embedded Formative Assessment*. Solution Tree: Bloomington, IN.

William, D. & Leahy, S. (2015). *Embedding Formative Assessment: Practical Techniques for K-12 Classrooms*. Learning Sciences International: West Palm Beach, FL.

Digital Resources

The Teaching Channel is a source for a number of video segments



There is an extraordinary collaborative spirit when you are learning and growing.

~Robbie Robertson



that feature protocols for talk partners, collaborative conversation and use of peer feedback.

[Traffic Light Protocol](#) [In Notice, I Wonder Protocol](#) (4th & 5th Grade)

[Accountable Talk Stems](#)

[Open Ended Questions](#)

[Socratic Seminar](#) (12th Grade)

[Literature Circles](#)

[Assessing Collaborative Conversations](#)

[Peer Conferences](#) (7th Grade)

Professional Texts

This month we are recommending two professional texts that contain useful examples of how students can be supportive learning resources to one another.

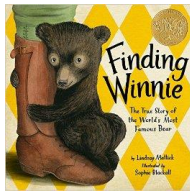
[Active Learning Through Formative Assessment](#)

by Shirley Clarke, 2008

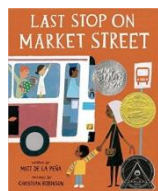
[Peer Assessment That Works: A Guide for Teachers](#)

By Betty McDonald, 2015

Literature for Children and Adolescents



This year's Caldecott Award winner is *Finding Winnie: The True Story of the World's Most Famous Bear* by Lindsay Mattick. If you ever wondered how Winnie the Pooh came to be, this engaging children's book will answer your questions and teach you even more. Check out this book and other [Caldecott](#) honor books.



The Newbery Medal for 2016 has been awarded to *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt De La Pena. "Every Sunday after church, CJ and his grandma ride the bus across town. But today, CJ wonders

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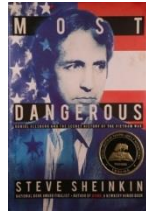
www.maine.gov/doe/calendar/



What's near and dear to my heart is cooperative conversation.

~Gale Norton

why they don't own a car like his friend Colby. Why doesn't he have an iPod like the boys on the bus? Each question is met with an encouraging answer from grandma, who helps him see the beauty—and fun—in their routine and the world around them” (Amazon Review). Explore this thought-provoking text and the other [Newbery](#) honor books.



The 2016 Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) nonfiction award winner, [Most Dangerous: Daniel Ellsberg and the Secret History of the Vietnam War](#) by Steve Sheinkin, recounts journalist Daniel Ellsberg's leak of the Pentagon Papers which led to the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War.



The Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (ALAN) 2016 picks include [Rebel Bully Geek Pariah](#) by Erin Jade Lange. Sam Cherie is invisible, and that's just how she likes it. She's had enough trouble in her life, between her addict of a mother and the horribly disfiguring scars that cover her head, without the added worry of trying to fit in. However, one tiny bad decision forces Sam to go on the run with three other misfits into the most terrifying night of their lives.

For additional information about this edition, email:

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To subscribe to Literacy Links:

<https://mailman.informe.org/mailman/listinfo/maineliteracy>

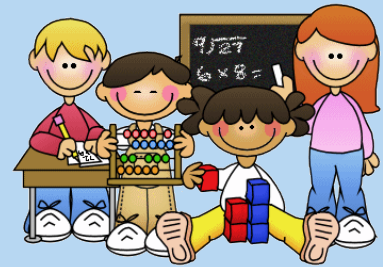
To view back editions of Literacy Links:

<http://www.maine.gov/doe/ela/resources/literacy-links.html>

To view Maine DOE Newsroom and Commissioner's Updates:

<http://mainedoeneews.net/>

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