

# Clarity

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in the  
Classroom

Using Formative Assessment for  
Building Learning-Focused Relationships


by Michael Absolum  
edited by James Gray  
and Meagan Mutchmor



PORTAGE & MAIN PRESS

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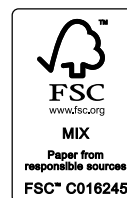
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## Preface to the North American Edition

### How We Came to Love This Book and Use It to Guide Our Practice

For some years, we had worked with countless educators using a variety of professional resources to support the understanding and implementation of “assessment for learning” (AFL) practices. While we experienced some success, there was always a sense that we were lacking an essential component of the learning process. We knew that the foundation for success with assessment for learning was the involvement of students in the assessment and learning process. But we needed more *clarity* in our understanding of how to achieve the primary purpose of assessment, which is to support student learning.

It all changed with a conversation...

While talking to British assessment expert Ruth Sutton,<sup>1</sup> James was told, “You must read this book.” And so began a journey that has been in the making for the past few years. James googled author Michael Absolum’s name and found a supplier who would put five copies of his book on a plane to a city at the centre of Canada.

At the time we were both working with a group of teachers, helping them to reflect on their practice and refine their understanding of assessment for learning (AFL). After the teachers begged to continue their learning conversations, we decided it was a perfect opportunity to use *Clarity in the Classroom* as an anchor for future conversations with this group. And so, another set of books was ordered and put on a plane to Winnipeg.

So how did we use this book with that target group? We asked all teachers in the group to begin by reading the first chapter overview and to do the first “Try This!” activity on page 31. The activity became the focus of our next session and led to purposeful discussions about “learning versus doing” and “engagement versus compliance.” We began a book study, and the teachers shared their reflections about what had most influenced them. This resulted in a published chapter synopsis by the group and further reflection about their assessment practices. (Comments in this book tagged “Teachers who tried this” comes from our work with these teachers.)

1 A leading educator and international speaker in the field of Assessment for Learning. Sutton is coauthor, with Pauline Clarke and Thompson Owens, of the series “Creating Independent Student Learners,” Portage & Main Press, 2006.

The book continued to inspire us, and that summer our school division brought Michael Absolum to Canada to conduct a three-day summer institute on AFL and learning-focused relationships. Eighty teachers, administrators, and support personnel willingly gave up the best three days in August to begin their own journey as reflective practitioners. Michael helped many of them find new ways to be more purposeful in their approach to teaching and learning.

From there, the school division held a fall session to introduce AFL and learning-focused conversations throughout the division. We then both attended an assessment conference in New Zealand and toured classrooms with Michael's staff, as they held learning conversations with colleagues with whom they were working.

As math (Meagan) and language arts (James) consultants, we both refer to this book often and have found many ways to integrate its message into our conversations with teachers. *Clarity in the Classroom* helps those of us who have been at it for a while to refocus, revisit, and reflect on the fundamental purpose of assessment. Michael Absolum brings to the forefront the importance of building a learning-focused relationship between teacher and student to make “assessment for learning” principles work effectively. Regardless of geographic location, the practical examples shared in this book and the ideas about the nature of student learning, the nature of the student/teacher relationship, the skills teachers need to support students, and the skills students need to learn in order to learn best are universal. *Clarity in the Classroom* is an essential resource for North American teachers and administrators looking to support and enhance the learning opportunities for all students.

### How You Could Use *Clarity in the Classroom (CITC)*

Teachers will find *CITC* a useful resource to use as a book study with colleagues. The practical strategies shared offer a professional learning community of teachers opportunities to work through several of the “Try This” sections in the book and compare and discuss the impact the strategies have had on their instructional practice as well as on student learning.

Administrators will find *CITC* useful in supporting the professional development of teaching staff through ongoing learning conversations that employ a variety of the strategies discussed in the book. Several administrators have used selected quotes from *CITC* as discussion and reflection points with their staff within a weekly staff memo. *CITC* also helps provide clarity and deepen their understanding by breaking down the bigger ideas of assessment into smaller bits.

District professional support staff will find *CITC* a valuable resource for expanding their own knowledge of assessment strategies as they continue the important work of supporting the instructional practices of a diverse range of teaching staff.

Finally, superintendents will find *CITC* a valuable resource to reference when working with new administrators and district support staff in developing their understanding of effective assessment practices through the building of learning-focused relationships.

—Meagan Mutchmor and James Gray  
Winnipeg, Manitoba, July 2010

## Preface to the Original Edition

The teachers at Lin's school have many students who have limited personal resources, making learning at school initially difficult for them. Many of these students have underdeveloped language and inadequate personal strategies to manage themselves, their learning, and their relationships with their peers. These teachers struggle on a daily basis with how to teach these students effectively so that when they leave school they are able to confidently and competently take their full place in society. The struggle is never easy. These teachers deserve all the help and support they can get. This book is for them.

*Our experiences...all point to the need to rethink a teacher's core aim—enhancing pupils' learning. To achieve this calls for...a readiness to change the parts both teacher and pupils play in supporting the learning process.*

—Black et al. 2002

## Acknowledgements

This book started life as a conversation with my colleagues at Evaluation Associates Ltd. about what formative assessment really meant that teachers and students had to know and be able to do. I want to acknowledge my huge debt to them. This book came about because of their ability to think through the issues; to provide new insights and examples of classroom practice when they were needed; to trial and improve ideas through their work with teachers and students in schools; and to allow me to sneak off and write while they reviewed endless drafts with unwavering enthusiasm. My grateful thanks to them all: Ruth Hammond, Judy Munro-Keene, Angela Thorogood, Catherine Hope, Allan Powell, Sue Leslie, Adrienne Carlisle, Michelle Nell, and Barbara-Anne Alexander.

Evaluation Associates has been involved in offering professional development to New Zealand schools for more than 10 years. In that time, we have worked with a large number of principals and teachers who are out there, day after day, making a difference to student learning. I want to acknowledge the contribution they have made to our thinking and the ideas in this book. I hope they find it worthy of them. I also want to acknowledge the insightful contributions of those principals and teachers with whom we have worked particularly closely over a long period of time. These people are our close colleagues with whom we develop, test, and deepen our understanding of what support teachers need in order for assessment for learning to be used richly within classrooms:

- **Lin Avery**, the original designer of our program in schools and now at Glen Taylor School
- **David Bradley**, Westbridge Residential School
- **Cherie Taylor-Patel**, Flanshaw Road School, especially for her contribution to student-led conferences
- **Karen Windross**, Waitakere School
- **Sandra Jenkins**, Glenbrae School
- **Brenna Innes**, Matipo School
- **Rachel Shamy**, Birkenhead Primary

- **Sarah Martin**, Red Beach School
- **Riverina School and Sylvia Park School**, for the photographs
- **Coatesville School**, for the school reports

My partner, Mary, is my greatest critic and my greatest support. That this book is here at all is testimony to her profound understanding of teaching and learning, and her patience.

—*Michael Absolum, June 2006*

# Overview

# 1

We all want students who have high expectations of themselves as learners; students who feel confident about their capacity to learn, who set high goals for their learning, and who work for themselves to construct enjoyable, challenging learning pathways to their futures.

This book contains research-based principles, strategies, and techniques that teachers can use to help students to learn: to help them be the type of students we all want. It outlines what teachers need to think about, and how they need to act towards students to encourage them to become strong partners in the teaching/learning endeavour. It also covers how teachers can teach their students the skills they need to be effective partners, and what teachers need to know in order to be effective partners themselves.

The book is about more than an approach to teaching and assessment; it is about

- The nature of student learning;
- The nature of the relationship between teacher and student that needs to be present to sustain that learning;
- What the teacher needs to do in order for students to learn powerfully and effectively.

When teachers use these approaches the classroom becomes one in which:

1. **Student achievement improves:** When students have a clearer understanding of what achievement looks like, they have a greater chance of achieving, and they do.
2. **Student behaviour improves:** Once students really engage in learning, their behaviour improves, because their attention is focused on learning.

*The way I speak to the children has changed and is now more learning-focused, and I've seen a real improvement in the behaviour of the kids.*

3. **Student ownership of learning improves:** The students have a clearer idea of their learning journey, because they are fully involved in every step of the process.

*They tell me what they need help with; they really do. It just amazes me what they know. I thought, "Oh, they won't be able to think up how I could help them," but they do; they really do.*



*The children can see where they need help and how well they are [doing].  
It's amazing, really, how honest and sincere their judgments become.*

*They learn to think about how their learning is going and what else they need help with. They're more confident to ask for help, and much more willing to stay on the mat for further support.*

4. **Student engagement increases:** The quality of work becomes more important than the quantity, and the students—being more focused on their own learning—are keen to see their own growth and progress.

*They are more focused; they can see where they're going and what they're able to do. They have strategies to use; they have more confidence and can see the results of their efforts.*

*It [learning intentions] sets things out clearly in your mind, and with the success criteria it's a really good way to know what you still don't quite understand.*

5. **Enjoyment returns to teaching:** Because everything to do with student behaviour is focused on learning, the quality of the working environment is good for everyone.

*All my conversations with the children are about learning, and I no longer have to nag.*

*It's revitalized my teaching; it's given me a burst of enthusiasm. It's given me more energy, it's more rewarding, and the students are far more focused on their achievement.*

*I haven't felt like this about my teaching for years; it's just great.*

*It brings the joy back into teaching again.*

This book is about how you can create these conditions in your classroom. It begins by outlining a view of learning that we see as a precondition to all of the understandings needed by teachers and students to create effective conditions for learning. It then provides a detailed description of what these understandings are, the implications for planning, and finally, how family can be brought into partnership with teacher and student to further support learning.

## Learning's the Thing

Every teacher knows a lot about the nature of learning. In our view there are two critical aspects to learning that should be highlighted from the beginning:

1. **Learning, to be effective, must enable the learner to “own” the learning process:** Owning a new skill, concept, or understanding can only be achieved through a process of deep engagement with the skill, concept, or understanding—practising it, trying it out, using it. Marie Clay (2005) describes how young children actively work at learning to read and write:

*[Y]oung constructive readers and writers work at problem-solving sentences and messages, choose between alternatives, read and write sentences, work on word*