

# Unleashing the Power of Assessment: A Path to Meaningful Learning and Improvement in Education

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Many of our young currently struggle to extract real value from our compulsory education system. While the adults in education have held students and their parents accountable for young people's compulsory attendance at school since the passing of *The Education Act 1877*, we haven't met our social contract by guaranteeing all of them quality learning experiences when they are there. We have loudly espoused the importance of equitable, inclusive education for all but the promises in these words have never been kept. Instead, we engage in polarising debate and argument where each side of the debate decries the other, and we have 'literacy wars' and 'assessment wars' and 'knowledge vs competencies wars' based on different ideologies, rather than focused learning and problem solving.

For the last 20 years successive governments and their agencies have expressed the need for urgent improvement and a range of worthy policies has emerged, but there has not been ongoing effective implementation, evaluation and iterative improvement of the policy ideas.

In our view, the lack of systemic improvement has, at its core, a profound misunderstanding of the essential roles that learner agency and assessment actually play in all learning and improvement.

We see the following seven components as the key elements required for effective learning or improvement. The headings in bold are the components of learning anything, anywhere, at any level of the system and by the system itself. We have directed the detail (in italics) to classroom learning.

1. **Purpose and motivation.** *The 'why' of learning – the learner understands why and how the learning, in general and in its component parts, is important, or interesting or exciting. This knowledge supports their engagement with the learning.*
2. **Content and scope.** *The 'what' of learning – the goals of learning and the progressions of learning (the curriculum) are clear to learner and teacher/coach/mentor.*
3. **Conditions for learning.** *Teacher/coach/mentor and learner are competent in their respective roles. The teacher is competent in the role, and ensures that the environment is conducive to learning so that each learner becomes competent as a learner, able to take agency over their learning.*
4. **Co-constructed Assessment.** *The co-constructed assessment of current knowledge – learner and teacher together find out what the learner currently knows and what they need to know next.*
5. **Teaching.** *Active instruction – teacher uses subject knowledge and pedagogical competence, including effective exemplification and feedback, to enable the learner to establish and practise their learning, and gain the knowledge to monitor their own progress.*

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<sup>1</sup> The authors of [Reviving the Flames of Excellence: Igniting a System that Learns](#) have written this blog to summarise the points made in that paper. It does not cover the section of the paper which focuses on answers. Another blog will follow.

6. **Learning.** Active learning – *through active engagement, participation, practice and reflection, the learner is able to show understanding and mastery of the knowledge/skill/disposition in a number of ways and situations. They know what ‘good’ looks like and have the agency to self-monitor and self-correct.*
7. **Co-constructed Next Steps.** The co-constructed assessment of what has been learnt and what to learn next. *Using ‘of the moment’ and at times more formal assessment, teacher and learner work together to determine next steps in learning.*

All of the components are integral to all learning by all students and all adults. This framework is clear about the fundamental importance of both assessment and learner agency and the nexus between the two.

### **Agency**

To bring about systemic improvement at scale, the people involved at all levels of the education system must be active agentic learners who own the need for improvement, both of themselves as professionals, and of the system that they are a part of. The best learners are constantly testing themselves to check on progress:

*“I think I understand these ideas now, but I need to find out if I really do.” (Student)*

*“I think I have supported all of my students so that they are now confident to tell me when they don’t understand, but I need to check with the ones who I think were less confident.” (Teacher)*

*“I think I’ve supported all of our teachers to implement assessment for learning in their classrooms, but I need to check that they have been able to make the changes and that student learning and progress have improved as a result” (Principal)*

*“We have processes we are introducing across the system in order to achieve improved excellence and equity. I need to check that we also have the assessment tools and evaluative processes that will tell us whether improvement happens. Are these tools and processes also compatible with sound leading, teaching and learning at the school level?” (Policy maker)*

To address our current issues, we all need to reshape our view of ourselves to become full-time learners and skilled collaborative problem-solvers with those we are charged with teaching, leading and improving.

### **Assessment**

Irrespective of where you find yourself within the education system, good assessment information is critical if you wish to learn and improve. This is obviously true if you are a student, but it is just as true if you are a teacher, a school leader, a staff member of one of the central education agencies, or a professional development facilitator. If you don’t know where you are now in your own particular learning or improvement endeavour, you cannot know what to do next to make further progress.

Assessment holds the key to effective learning and improvement. It determines where learning starts and it is where progress is checked. Assessment is primarily for guiding learning. From there,

improvement can come. If the role of assessment and evaluation in education were properly understood and activated, at every level of the system, it would be possible to learn which policy initiatives really work, which school initiatives really work, which classroom initiatives really work, and what adjustments need to be made so we can achieve our desired outcomes.

If we get agency and assessment right across the system, improvement will follow at all levels.