

## Conferences -- Something's Got to Give!

**Today's guest blog is co-written by Mary Jane O'Connell and Kara Vandas. Mary Jane is a former elementary principal in Douglas County Colorado, and Kara Vandas is the former Director of Teacher Effectiveness at the Colorado League of Charter Schools. They are both education consultants and trainers for Visible Learning for John Hattie. They are also the authors of the forthcoming book *Partnering with Students to Build Ownership of Learning* (spring 2015).**

How many of us have sat through pointless or less-than-informational parent-teacher conferences? It often goes a little something like this: Mom asks, "How is Jeff doing in your class? I see he earned a "C," and I want to know why." Jeff sits silently, afraid the teacher will "spill-it" about what he has been up to in class. The teacher responds, "Sometimes Jeff does his work and is on-task, but other times he struggles to focus and talks too much. He loves to get the class going and cuts-up too much. I also have a problem with Jeff turning in his work." Mom and Dad turn to Jeff, "What's this we hear about you goofing off in class?" Jeff shrugs. Dad says, "We'll talk about this at home." Jeff disengages as the conversation turns to missed assignments and lack of motivation.

Many of us have been there, as the student, teacher, or parent. It is painful, and what's more, Jeff leaves feeling deflated rather than invigorated. His future motivation will most likely be to get everyone off his back, rather than to take greater ownership of his learning. We can even imagine that Jeff will be planning his escape from the next conference. In addition, little useful information was shared in the meeting. Did anyone come away with an understanding of what Jeff learned or didn't learn or the effort he expended? Something's got to give!

What if we asked Jeff to articulate and provide proof his own learning? What if he prepared evidence of his learning to show himself, his teacher, and his parents what he had achieved through his own effort? What if we put him at the center of the conference and the learning?

Professor John Hattie (2012) refers to this idea as creating assessment capable learners, those that can answer:

- *Where am I going?* or What is the learning goal?
- *How am I going/doing?* or What is my progress toward the learning goal?
- *Where to next?* or How can I deepen my learning?

In other words, assessment capable learners own their learning, their progress, and their next steps. *They can own and lead conferences as well.* Before we outline a different model for conferences, we would suggest one additional question that will catapult the parent-teacher conference, as well as classroom relationships forward: *What is my contribution?* How many students are asking how they contribute to their own learning and that of their peers? How many teachers are encouraging the idea of students making a major contribution to the learning environment, lesson planning, feedback and conferences?

We could revolutionize conferences and the way that students feel about learning if we allowed these four powerful questions to drive our practice and conversations. Let’s begin with changing conferences from a less than helpful obligation of parents, teachers, and students to an empowering experience for students. We suggest three steps:

First, establish success criteria *with* the students by taking the time to determine what criteria will prove students know and are able to show they have reached the learning goals for the unit of study. Teachers can do this in a variety of ways, but the key is to involve students in the process so they develop an understanding of what success looks like and have a clear pathway to reach the learning goals.

Second, as the learning occurs ask students to gather evidence in a portfolio, notebook, or electronic tool that can be shared to prove learning. We recommend that the evidence shows progress, is messy, and includes mistakes, feedback, multiple drafts, misconceptions addressed, and the student’s own detection of errors, etc. During the entire learning process, ensure that the evidence students collect aligns to the success criteria and learning goals.

Third, change the current conference scenario by asking students to share their achievements through evidence with their parents. The conference can follow the four powerful questions that define an engaged and assessment capable learner, which will provide everyone with the information needed to understand what learning occurred and what is still to be learned.

New Conference Scenario:

<b>Question</b>	<b>Evidence Students Share</b>
<i>Where am I going?</i>	Student-friendly learning goal(s) and success criteria developed as a class
<i>How am I going/doing?</i>	Achievement or progress toward learning goal through student work samples, aligned to learning goals and success criteria
<i>Where to next?</i>	Content and skills yet to be learned or ways to deepen learning, according to formative assessments and success criteria
<i>What is my contribution?</i>	Students explain or share evidence of how they contributed to the class to move learning forward for everyone.

By empowering students to own their learning and providing a meaningful conference experience for everyone involved, conferences can be changed forever and so can students!

**References:**

Hattie, J. A. (2012). *Visible learning for teachers: Maximizing impact on teachers*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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