

The Dilemmas of Change in the Assessment Culture, Part 2

By [Starr Sackstein](#) on February 20, 2018 5:41 PM



Guest post by Azima Thakor

This is the second part of a longer post about the [changing assessment culture](#). Read as Ms. Thakor shares the rest of her story.

After extensive research and consulted with numerous specialists and teachers who have performed and successfully implemented the approach in their classrooms. He is well-versed in the pros of this approach and favors using it because he wants to change the way we look at education—no longer labeling students as 90s or 80s students but rather as mastering overall expectations set by the curricula.

The "gradeless" concept was introduced in September 2016 and gradually prepared the staff by inserting gradeless information links, facts and research during several meetings and PD days throughout the year for staff to become more knowledgeable. He provided staff meeting time and PD Daytime to engage in dialogue about how staff felt about it and several Q&A sessions were held by him and specialists to overcome fears, anxiety, or confusion. He also stated that staff could come see him anytime in his office with questions on how this would work logistically and how to handle opposing /argumentative stakeholders (ie. parents). He told us that it was something he was very passionate about personally but that it would be something of the near and progressive-future in education—so basically, "get with the times". He has gradually mentioned the initiative at parent and community council meetings over the past year to gauge reactions.

Who was involved and what their interests were

The administration already did the research and deemed this change doable and commonsensical since it focused on more formative practices. Many teachers were on board with this initiative because, although radical, it changes how we see education and its goal—enduring learning processes leading to mastery vs grades for a transcript. They were interested in being innovative and taking risks to improve how their students learn. Some wanted to do it because it was an inevitable shift anyway so why challenge the principal and look bad.

However, several teachers were unhappy and felt that it was too wishy-washy and left the teacher with no control in the classroom. Some felt that it was Jim's way of "looking good" with superintendents. These teachers were interested in sticking with the norm—giving grades—because that's what students, parents, and universities expected.

What factors shaped the behavior of actors

Teachers who supported the initiative were already adept at using google classroom and tech tools for 21st-century learners. Jim provided several PD days to help teachers become more confident using Google Suite by arranging beginner, intermediate and advanced training classes.

What was interesting but not surprising is that most of the teachers against the change still used a textbook, lecture-based style teaching in their practices. Furthermore, many of these angry teachers worried that their classroom management would be affected but I feel that if a teacher is confident in their management practices, it's easier to take more teaching / learning risks. Also, many of these teachers have not progressed in becoming more acquainted with G Suite and opted for other non-assessment workshops during PD.

The actual or expected effect of the decision or change

Jim has successfully received board approval and we will be officially implementing this "gradeless" approach in September 2018 for incoming grade nines, with tens following in 2019, and elevens in 2020. He is currently working with Humber College (who also favors this approach) to set up an easy-transition system for grade 12s into their school. Six teachers from various departments (including myself, in Modern Languages) will pilot this for incoming grade nines this year in order to become more confident and to be eventual lead teachers for this when it officially begins.

Jim already arranged for the "gradeless" pilot team to meet to establish standard criteria and to get familiar with goal setting, deconstructing their respective curricula, and brainstorm strategies for effective implementation. I was sparked by Toulouse's (2010) use of the term "transformative educational change" because I feel like it encompasses my (and Jim's) philosophy and the

many effective techniques to promoting positive growth in education - a combination of transformational leadership, teacher knowledge, culture and inclusion with the effort to making sure that change does take place (Page 15).

As expected by Jim, this process of organizational assessment culture change has had the anticipated impact of support and anger from three types of teachers: those who are innovators, compliant or complacent. The school is comprised of a combination of progressive educators or slightly conservative educators, young and more senior teachers, 21st-century learners or traditionalists etc. Many teachers were on-board and willing to take risks for innovation purposes. Many agreed on the importance of enduring learning processes leading to mastery vs grades for a transcript. Some were compliant and wanted to do it because it was an inevitable shift-to-come so why challenge the principal and appear disobedient. Many were complacent and against changing the norm of giving grades—because that's what students, parents and universities expected and this is their current comfort level. Several were unhappy and felt that it was too wishy-washy and left the teacher with no control in the classroom. Some felt that it was Jim's way of "looking good" with superintendents.

Several teachers supporting this initiative recognize that: "Teachers' professional learning that is embedded in professional work has a positive influence on classroom practices and student learning" (Bascia 2004, page 5). Teachers who supported the initiative were already adept at using google classroom and tech tools for 21st-century learners or were in the process learning Google Suite. Jim provided several PD days to help teachers become more confident using Google Suite by arranging beginner, intermediate and advanced training workshops (offering skill-level PD aimed at different learners). Based on the competing values framework by Cameron & Quinn (2011) and as mentioned above, my department scored 3rd highest at 13.3 percent for Adhocracy / creative culture. Specifically, my moderns/ family

studies department focuses on team accomplishments and providing an empowering environment for the teacher as well as working on teacher development (Cameron and Quinn, 2011, page 35). We should have scored higher in the Ad hoc / creative culture category since we are adaptable, flexible, and creative with uncertainty as well as dynamic in our approaches (Cameron & Quinn, 2011, page 49). We scored higher for this category in the "preferred" vs "now" column at almost one-third ranking because it is an area of professional development that we are working on to improve as a team. We do not perform based on "centralized power or authority relationship" (Cameron & Quinn, 2011, page 49), instead: "power flows from individual to individual or from task team to task team, depending on what the problem is being addressed at the time. Emphasis on individuality, risk-taking and anticipating the future is high...people stick their necks out and take risks. Effective leadership is visionary, innovative and risk-oriented. The glue that holds the organization together is the commitment to experimentation and innovation. The emphasis is on being at the leading edge of new knowledge, products, and services. Readiness for change and meeting new challenges are important. The organization's long-term emphasis is on rapid growth and acquiring new resources. Success means producing unique and original products and services" (Cameron & Quinn, 2011, page 49-51).

Many of the teachers who are versed in taking risks in the classroom feel confident with the assessment shift and understand the benefits of this initiative of involving students in assessment conversations for improved student learning.

Similar to the humanistic approach taken in the dilemma of graduating Ada from Middle School in Levinson & Fay (2016), where giving her respect and letting her take a proactive position in her fate by being present at the meeting would have helped to make a more ethically appropriate decision, teachers understand the importance of including students in assessment

decisions: "Teachers who define their role solely in academic terms...risk seeing their students narrowly as a means to achieve "100 percent proficiency" or to "close the gap", rather than seeing them as individuals with valuable skills, interests, and challenges" (Levinson & Fay, 2016, page 22). It is possible that Ada was failing because she felt disconnected from the course content and would have benefited from more engaging opportunities such as project-based learning and other creative approaches Levinson & Fay, 2016, page 23).

This is precisely one of the aims of the gradeless approach, whereby students are placed at the forefront of their learning experiences and create a culture of self-regulated and innovative learning. Levinson & Fay (2016, pages 24-25), explain the importance of including students in conversations about their future decisions: "As a first step, this means actually interacting with the humans whose lives are at stake and asking them how they feel, what they need, what they hope for"; "To include [insert: Student] in a meeting about her future would thus be a mark of respect, a way to acknowledge her humanity, to treat her as an end rather than a means...involving her in the process of decision making at this important junction in her life would have positive consequences. [Student] could provide her teacher with the essential information they need to make a good decision. Participating in the meeting might also help her feel more proactive about her path; she might feel she owns the decision, and hence have a better chance of following through with it". Therefore, progressive teachers supporting the gradeless initiative recognize the need to have open conversations with students to develop their goals and their metacognitive skills - a challenging, yet, necessary habit for learners.

Teachers who are compliant with the initiative have demonstrated the ideal of "Social belonging". Walton's (2007) article mentions the issue of social belonging, seeing oneself as socially connected, which is a basic human

motivation (82). He adds that when people feel respected in the workplace, they are more likely to display compliance with authority. Social connectedness and compliance are related. For example, in my school, and because of Jim's progressive ideas on assessment, if you are not on board and trying to improve yourself, you will ultimately get left behind. You will thus appear as incompetent among staff members because most people are making a shift towards using Google Classroom, for example.

Furthermore, teachers feel respected by Jim because he reminds them constantly of how grateful and appreciative he is for the work they do with students and student success. Teachers are confident in their practice because they know they have administrative support. So although teachers do not necessarily agree with the shift, they will attempt to "change" simply because they respect Jim and trust his judgment.

Ferguson (2014) mentions that there is a correlation between factors related to discontent and teachers changing jobs (336). However, in my experience, teachers have remained and will remain where they are for a number of reasons: Teachers feel it more work to change schools; teachers do not want to be challenged at another school; Teachers have no or little initiative to develop professionally; thus they accept the present changing culture because it means less work ultimately since they are already comfortable in the current stable culture and can contribute towards the change, since it may be less work.

Many complacent and "resistant" teachers did not want to change for fear of ruining or disrupting the "structural stability in the group" already at play (Schein 2004, 14). They felt "why fix what's not broken". I am fairly certain that teachers against this initiative were actually worried about their own lacking tech skills primarily, which acted as a mental block and barrier for them to learn about gradeless - hence taking nonassessment PD workshops,

out of fear. One angry teacher stated, "these kids don't have the mental capacity to engage in a mature conversation about their own learning. How can we give them such a big responsibility? Forget it!". According to Starr (2017), resistant teachers demonstrated their opposition to the change by "nonaction, ill will and resentment and defensive or confrontational dispositions" (Chitpin & Evers 2017, pg 130).

Many teachers engaged in hostile conversations with Jim, which he de-escalated gracefully. Others simply stated, "I won't do it!" I also find that there are teachers that are against any change in the school, which can be stimulated by their "desires to challenge" and maintain status quo. "Major change requires implementers giving up feelings of comfort, long-held values or beliefs, and established routines. It entails new thinking, extra time and effort" (Chitpin & Evers 2017, pg 130-131). Several of these teachers are more senior and feel that their practices and ultimately their "identity" (Chitpin & Evers 2017, pg 131), are being challenged - Again, "why fix what's not broken?" Therefore, it is precisely these teachers that need more instructional support in order to feel confident with changing practices.

According to Figure 11.1 in Ferguson's article (2014), student engagement and outcome is the result of teaching quality, PLCs, instructional support etc by responsive leadership provided in base working conditions (Page 334). Therefore, in order to overcome complacency, more instructional support through effective leadership is needed to promote gains in student success.

The anger from some teachers has subsided, partly because at least one person per department is piloting the initiative, possibly alleviating fears and concerns. Also, Jim has been very patient in allowing staff to transition and test the waters for comfort; as well, he has spoken to many staff directly and calmly to assure them that they have his support when things "fail", as is the expectation with risk-taking behaviour but that he will support us in

becoming confident in this venture. He has simply emphasized that the staff attempt it with smaller assessments rather than go full-force and thus work together with the shared goal to improve student learning.

The key organizational lesson for any process of change is to first have developed and maintained a level of "structural stability" within a group (Schein, 2004), primarily before venturing into newer and riskier projects. Similar to the classroom setting, classroom management is key to moving learning forward. It is necessary to create a welcoming, safe, inclusive environment, which will foster positive and collaborative learning spaces. I believe that the assessment culture change that occurred in my school (which I will explain below) was mostly successful because stability and positive "school climate" as defined according to Bascia (2004) and categorized conveniently by Cameron & Quinn (2011) are already present in my school culture.

As Erickson (1987) mentions, regarding culture and conflict, "The point is that when reasons for conflict already exist between groups in society, cultural differences between them, whether the differences are large or small, become an excellent resource for engaging in and escalating the conflict" (Page 21). Strong/positive school culture is the ability to deal/cope with new conflict and ultimately overcome and make positive change. Therefore, with the stable culture, a group can adapt and cope with cultural changes more efficiently.

Additionally, Firestone in (Murphy and Louis 1999), mentions "facilitative leadership" as one approach to improving culture through "team-building, coordination and feedback, conflict resolution, articulation of visions, and provision of resources as means to foster a cohesive, change-oriented school culture" (Page 315). The importance of transformational leadership and keeping culture reflective. Currently, schools and leaders demonstrate this

through [professional learning communities](#) to track student data to make improvements in schools. Therefore, similar to what Jim fosters, supporting high performance (page 315), and promoting teacher communities, his transformational leadership affects the goals and culture of the school, "which have direct ties to individual teachers' commitment to change and improvement" (Page 315).

This type of leadership is the "creation and management of tensions that keep schools in motion, or keep the culture actively reflective"; "requires constant development of many new leaders" (Page 315).

As mentioned previously, Jim identifies leadership qualities among his staff members. Firestone (Murphy and Louis 1999) states, "Good leadership requires that principals and other administrators manipulate both the formal organization (creating new teams or interdisciplinary groups to plan curriculum and assigning leadership roles to teachers) and various symbols that express the cultural intent behind the structural changes (finding special meeting spaces for teams that belong to them and giving teacher leaders symbolic prerogatives such as some budgetary authority) (Page 315). Providing and meeting teacher needs leads to student success.

I strongly believe that Jim took the correct approach to follow and implement a new initiative - over time, gradually and with patience and offering support. His leadership as described by Ferguson (2014) in basic working conditions leading to student outcome was, "responsive, respectful, reasonable yet rigorous" (Page 334). Over the span of months, he has provided multiple discussions, skill-level workshops and research-driven facts to support the change. He maintains constant transparency and provides an open dialogue with parents and the community at parent /community council meetings. As per Ferguson (2014), "community supports from parents and others can help foster the types of school-level conduct management that enables classroom

teachers to do their work effectively" (Page 362). Jim is aware of this and therefore acts accordingly to ensure that all stakeholders are included in the process.

In addition, I am certain that Jim hopes to [develop active teacher believers](#) in the school by providing several PD opportunities and ensuring that teachers' needs and skill levels are met during workshops:

"[E]ffective professional development can help raise teacher expectations and that well-designed instructional supports can increase professional community citizenship, thereby increasing the share of teachers who are active believers....[A]ctive believers are defined as teachers who expect more of students and participate more actively with colleagues as professional citizens concerned about improving teaching and learning....[a]ctive believer teachers deliver more academic support (where teachers care, confer, captivate, clarify and consolidate) and impose more academic press (where teachers challenge students and control classrooms in order to achieve rigor, respect, order and persistently on-task behaviors) (Ferguson 2014, Pages 335 and 362).

Promoting active teacher believers is essential in gaining school-wide support for new initiatives and refreshing school visions and goals.

According to Levinson & Fay (2016), the solution to a changing organizational culture is, "[b]alancing among different goods, looking for solutions that might meet multiple objectives simultaneously. It means moving between what is good for the individual, what is good for the organization, and the nebulous notion of what serves the public interest" - a workable and fair solution but with student success (as Jim would say) as the ultimate end goal (Page 19). This is achieved when, "the educational administrator...makes the well-being of students the fundamental value of all decision-making and actions" (Shapiro & Stefkovitch, 2011, Page 25) - As Jim

would say, "putting the best interests of students first".

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