

Making Assessment Meaningful in Cross-Cultural Contexts

"My parents are so backward. I mean, they don't understand any of this stuff and they just yell at me without thinking because they think I'm not studying well."

Andrey, Grade Nine

BACKGROUND:

This workshop is a condensed version of a long-term project undertaken at the International School of Almaty (ISA) in Almaty, Kazakstan between 2006 and 2008. A national school in the post-Soviet Central Asian state of Kazakhstan, ISA had recently received IBMYP authorization and was beginning to transition its educational programs from the Kazakh national curriculum to the MYP. By far the most challenging aspect of this process was implementing an authentic, transparent system of assessment which both met the requirements and ethos of the MYP but also could be understood and valued by all members of ISA's learning community (Kazakh students, parents and teachers).

The Kazakh national assessment system is heavily based on annual multiple-choice exams in all the major academic subjects. These are marked by committees appointed by the government, and very little or no explanation is given to justify students' results. This has led to a public mistrust of assessment, and a belief that teachers and students have no control over the final grades students receive. It has also, unfortunately, led to a deeply-rooted culture of corruption, in which parents feel their only option when they do not understand their child's grades is to harass or bribe school administrators and government officials into changing marks.

As part of its transition to the MYP, ISA phased out its participation in the national exam system and began to implement criterion-related assessment. This proved to be completely overwhelming to local parents and teachers who had no experience with this form of assessment. Conflicts and misunderstandings arose frequently, and a very real need to educate ISA's parent community on how criterion-related assessment works was identified. To help facilitate this process, two international teachers at ISA devised and conducted a series of participatory community workshops designed to make local parents, students and teachers more aware and comfortable with criterion-related assessment.

Grounding our rationale for our workshops in theories of community development, we facilitated a training course which met twice a month over the course of three months. The first course targeted grade ten and participation was mandatory for all students and parents. The research question guiding our work was always "how can we best facilitate a meaningful understanding of and appreciation for criterion-related assessment in our learning community?"

SESSIONS ONE AND TWO: WHAT DOES CRITERIA MEAN TO US?

Aim: To give course participants a personal connection to the concept of criterion-related assessment and to come up with a collective definition of the word criteria.

Step One: Creating a group definition of key terms

Working in age-specific small groups (i.e. parental groups and students groups), participants brainstormed words and associations connected to the words "criteria" and "assessment". All groups presented their ideas until a list of commonalities was created and a collective definition of these words produced. A translation (into Russian, the working language of Kazakhstan and ISA) of the official IBO definition of criterion-related assessment was handed out to all participants and discussed.

Step Two: Making a personal connection to criterion-based assessment

Participants were asked individually to think of a time when they received a mark for a piece of work and they did not understand why they received the mark they did. Participant were given such prompts as "why did you not understand the mark you received?", "how did you or others react to this mark?", "did you ever try to find out what happened, and did you get a satisfactory answer?", "how could the situation have been resolved?" and were asked to write individually for 10-15 minutes about this experience. Participants then shared their reflections and discussed the question "do you think this experience would have been different if you had been given criteria which you understood before doing the assignment?"

As a final exercise, participants were asked to think about something they did regularly as part of their daily lives (hold meetings, sell products, do housework, cook, drive, write an essay, teach a lesson), and were asked to develop a short list of criteria for assessing that activity, both in terms of doing it well and poorly. These lists were discussed and role-played, with students "assessing" activities the adults had chosen according the criteria they created and vice versa.

SESSIONS THREE - SIX: Understanding Criteria in Education

Aim: To familiarize participants with how MYP criteria works in reality

Step One: Understanding and Using Key Terms

Key vocabulary words from MYP published criteria (Language B, Humanities, Science) were blown up and posted around the classroom. Working in mixed groups (parents and students together), participants were encouraged to walk around the room, stopping at each word on the wall. The groups were asked to fill out a reflection form for each word, to help them better understand the word. At the end of the exercise, participants were asked to stand beside the word which they "understood best", "understood least", "thought was most important", "thought was least important", "thought they could be successful at", "thought they needed help with". These were then discussed in small group question and answer sessions.

Step Two: Understanding and Using Simplified Criteria

Working in mixed groups, participants studied a different extract/set of simplified criteria for the same MYP subjects used in the earlier gallery walk activity and taught the rest of the group how to understand and use their criteria. Participants filled out summary worksheets to help them listen to each group's presentation.

For homework, participants were given a complete set of subject-specific criteria and asked to study it, completing a guided reflection worksheet.

Step Three: Applying Criteria to Student Work

Working first in age-specific and then in mixed groups, participants spent two sessions assessing a selection (above average, average and below average) of real samples from ISA student works in various subjects. Participants marked works first and then got into mixed groups to discuss the marks they had given. Groups had to come to an agreement on a mark for each piece of work, thus getting a taste of the standardization process.

Step Three: Reflection and Discussion

A final session (session six) was used to give participants a chance to share and reflect on their understandings, ask questions and role play any potential issues or conflicts they were concerned about. The feedback from parents about this course was overwhelmingly positive, and the course was extended over subsequent years to include parents and students in earlier years of MYP. For teachers in other international schools, the ideas from this workshop may be helpful when working with parents or students new to the IB program and criterion-related assessment.

Definitions of "criterion" handed out to participants

The word criterion (plural is criteria) comes from the Greek word *kriterion* which means a "way of judging". The word criterion today means a principle or standard by which something may be judged or decided.

The MYP defines Criterion-Related Assessment as assessment "based on a pre-determined set of criteria that all students should have access to. The MYP identifies a set of objectives for each subject group, and the level of student success in reaching the objectives of each subject group is measured in terms of levels of achievement described in each assessment criterion. Students' work is assessed only against the defined assessment criteria and not against the work of other students." (MYP From Principles Into Practice, 2008)

Think of a time when...

Think of a time when you received a mark that you did not understand for a test or essay or project. Did you feel that the mark was too high, or too low? Why did you feel this way about the mark you received? What did you do to try to find out why you got the mark you did? How did your teacher or parents explain the mark to you? How did this whole situation make you feel about yourself and school?

Write for 10-15 minutes about this incident, including as much detail as you can about what happened and how you felt about it.

Criteria in our daily lives...

Think of something you do often in your daily life (run meetings, speak on the phone, write essays, cook, drive a car etc.) and try to answer the following...

- What gives you a sense of success in this activity?
- When do you know you have done a good or bad job with this activity?
- What is the difference between how YOU perceive success in this activity and how others (your boss, your family, your neighbours) do?

Work together to choose ONE task that you do almost everyday and create a set of criteria to assess someone's performance of this task. 1 is the lowest criterion (for a poor job) and 4 is the highest (for an excellent job). For each number give TWO descriptors or objectives.

For example, with ironing a shirt:

1 = the shirt is wrinkled and looks untidy and should not be worn in public

2 = the shirt is wrinkled in some places but not in others, but is still only good enough to wear at home, for chores or a casual dinner

3 = the shirt has only very few wrinkles that are hard to notice. Wearing this shirt would be okay for a casual outing but not for work or formal attire.

4 = the shirt has no wrinkles anywhere and is ready to wear in public

Now Make Your Own Criteria!

Activity:

Who does this activity:

Our Criteria:

Criteria Vocabulary Response Sheet

To us, this word means

An example of this word in a real piece of work might be

This word is important for this criteria because

To receive a high mark for this criterion word, a student should