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QUICK TIPS

Learning Progressions

WHY?

Since we know that learning happens in small increments, it is helpful to have assessment tools that help both teachers and students see the growth along the way. If we only assess with right and wrong answers or some version of “This student ‘got it,’ and this one ‘didn’t get it,’” we are missing all the nuanced learning in between.

Learning progressions are tools that can be used by students and teachers that map out how learning develops in a given area. The progression can be pictured as a staircase, where everyone is moving toward the same doorway but might not all be on the same step. Progressions are based on research about what learners can do at different stages of learning (Duncan & Hmelo-Silver, 2009).

Learning progressions can be focused around unit goals and standards and help teachers identify specific next steps for students, as well as support the formation of small groups. The following learning progression is an example of a very specific goal tied to using context clues to figure out unfamiliar vocabulary.

Notice how the learning gets more proficient and developed as it moves from left to right. Consider how you could ask students to show you how they tried to figure out an unfamiliar word, and then identify where they are on this continuum. You would then reinforce what they are doing and teach them one new strategy in the column to its right. Of course, students can be exposed to learning progressions in whole-class discussions and then self-assess and make an action plan on their own as well.

Using Context Clues to Figure Out Unfamiliar Vocabulary

Learning Progression

| | | | |
|--|--|--|---|
| Rereads the sentence the unfamiliar word is in | Rereads the sentence it is in and the sentences before and after | Rereads the sentence it is in, the sentences before and after, and any visuals on the page Thinks about the type of word and part of speech | Rereads the sentence it is in, the sentences before and after, and any visuals on the page Thinks about the type of word and part of speech Rereads the sentence, inserting a synonym, and thinks about if it makes sense |
|--|--|--|---|

- *Frame as can-do actions.* Learning progressions are verb focused and should not be adjective focused. As you practice making them, look at each characteristic and think of the actions (verbs) a learner uses. Make that the focus of each column.
- *Promote growth first, grades second.* While you can turn progressions into grading tools, it is also helpful to make them formative assessment tools first. If you do need to assign a grade, you can consider if it will be based on growth—moving two steps to the right—or based on outcome—getting to the final column.
- *Stretch, challenge, engage.* Make sure progressions have a next step for all learners in your class. If you find out that students are already all the way on the right and experts on the progression at the start of a unit, add a step so they can be stretched to learn too. Or help the students select a different goal to work toward. It is a waste of time and sends a fixed mindset message if students who are already experts don't have opportunities to grow too.

While rubrics and checklists are quite common assessment tools in secondary classrooms, they don't show you what students need to learn next. Rubrics often have adjectives and adverbs that mark the difference between a 2 and 3, but that is almost entirely subjective and hard to make actionable. Take, for example, a rubric version of the context clues progression. It would have options like *rarely uses context clues*, *sometimes uses context clues*, *often uses context clues*, and so on. When frequency is used to define the difference on a rubric, it misses the whole learning opportunity of what the learner is and is not yet doing. It also makes more challenging skills less overwhelming by breaking them down into actionable moves a learner can develop over time. Think about the kind of feedback a student gets if a 2 is circled on a rubric and they need to move from *rarely* to *often*. How do they do that? If instead they see a progression that expects them to “think about the type of word and part of speech,” they have something they can learn to do.

GETTING STARTED

When planning a unit, you can look back at the unit's standards, essential questions, and goals to decide what learning progressions might be most useful. You do not need a learning progression for every skill in a unit but do want to consider which skills are high impact and will come up again and again in your department or course. Some departments make learning progressions together so there is continuity of expectations and supports. Some examples follow.

- A social studies department met and made some progressions they would all use for document-based writing and research.
- An English department collaborated and made learning progressions for each type of writing—narrative, informational, and argument.
- A math department created problem-solving progressions and aligned them with each course.
- A language department created conversation progressions they could use whether it was a Spanish, Italian, French, or German class.

Steps for Creating a Learning Progression

1. *Select a focus skill tied to unit goals.* This should be a thinking skill and not simply content knowledge. For example, you would not have a progression for “What is the chemical reaction of ___ and ___?” because that has one right answer. Instead, you might have a focus like “Describe the cause and effect of chemical reactions,” because the learner's ability to think about causes, effects, and the relationships between them develops over time. A progression could help the teacher and students see where they are and a clear next step.

2. *Start with proficiency in mind.* Think about what someone who is proficient in the skill does. Make it actionable. Try doing it yourself and naming what you do. By trying it with others in your department, it can help you put words to steps you “just do” without really thinking about it. This proficient set of actions will become your second-to-last column. That way, you can move backward by taking away some of the actions to the left and adding an action to make it more developed to the right. An example of the beginning of a progression from a social studies department follows.

Supporting Claims With Evidence: Social Studies Learning Progression

| | | | | |
|--|--|--|---|--|
| | | | Synthesizes multiple pieces of evidence from across texts | |
|--|--|--|---|--|

3. *Think backward.* Once you have the actions a proficient learner takes with a given skill, start to consider the actions that led to this. Sometimes you can take something away or think of a first step into that skill to create the columns to the left. An example of the supporting claims with evidence progression follows. Notice how the actions grow from *identify*, to *contextualize*, to *explain*, to *synthesize*.

Supporting Claims With Evidence: Social Studies Learning Progression

←

| | | | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Identifies parts of the text that support the claim | Contextualizes the parts of the text | Explains how the evidence connects to the claim | Synthesizes multiple pieces of evidence from across texts | |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|---|--|

4. *Think beyond.* Since everyone in the class should have a next step to grow toward, you will want to go back and add a step up from the proficient column. Consider what the next-grade-level learning might look like or what someone who excels in this area might think and do. Add the final column to the right, again making sure to focus on the actions that build across the entire continuum. This final column is not an expectation for all students, but does give some students something to think about and a place to continue to learn.

Supporting Claims With Evidence: Social Studies Learning Progression

| | | | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Identifies parts of the text that support the claim | Contextualizes the parts of the text | Explains how the evidence connects to the claim | Synthesizes multiple pieces of evidence from across texts | All of the previous columns and . . . Explains information that is missing from the argument (voices, perspectives, etc.) |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|---|--|

Using Learning Progressions With Students

Once you develop learning progressions, you can begin to introduce them to students. They are learning and assessment tools, not meant to be high stakes or fear inducing. Try not to show them with numbers at first so students focus more on the content in the columns than the score they would get for each one. What follows is a list of engaging ways to introduce and use the learning progressions with students so they become learning and feedback tools.

| ACTIVITY | DESCRIPTION |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Example Sort | Show examples you collected and work with students to sort and match them to the columns. |
| Create Examples | Create examples for each column with students or break them into small groups to try it out and share. |
| Name Strengths | Annotate an example with students naming the actions the learner did take. Then find those on the progression. |
| Name Next Steps | Look at an example and then study the column to the right. Discuss what next steps the learner could take. |
| Revise Together | Revise an example together based on taking an action from the column to the right. |
| Self-Reflection and Goal Setting | Students self-reflect by identifying where their thinking is on the progression and then set an actionable goal for what they will learn and do next. |
| Peer Feedback | Partners work together to identify where their thinking currently is on the progression and then make an action plan for what to try next. Then they check back in with each other for accountability and continued collaboration. |

HEADS UP

It can be hard to name your own actions. Sometimes it helps to have someone who is not an expert in your subject help you name your steps because they are less fluent in that area. They can often slow down enough to name the actions you are taking because they have to think much harder about how to do them. If you have grade-level professional learning community time with those in another subject area, you can work together across departments.

Add learning progressions to other structures. If you look back at many of the structures already mentioned in this book such as thinking routines and reflection (Section 3), share-outs (Section 4), and feedback, learning progressions can help support that work. Consider where students seem stuck and add in a learning progression to those parts.

Collaborate with students. Once students have experience using learning progressions, they can also help you develop them. Including students in the process gives them much more ownership and understanding. It can be helpful to first include them in developing progressions around habits, conversations, and note-taking because the students have so much experience and these progressions are more concrete than some higher-level thinking progressions around big ideas and concepts.



KEY IDEA

Learning progressions make assessment, goal setting, and instructional decision making clear and actionable. Use them with students throughout the year and across learning experiences.

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