



Collaborative Assessment Conference: Overview

Excerpted, with slight adaptations, from Looking Together at Student Work by Tina Blythe, David Allen, and Barbara S. Powell (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999).

A piece of student work has the potential to reveal not only the student's mastery of the curriculum's goals, but also a wealth of information about the student: her/his intellectual interests, strengths, and struggles. The Collaborative Assessment Conference was designed to give teachers a systematic way to mine this richness. It provides a structure by which teachers come together to look at a piece of work, first to determine what it reveals about the student and the issues she/he cares about, and then to consider how the student's issues and concerns relate to the teacher's goals for the student. The last part of the conversation — the discussion of classroom practice — grows out of these initial considerations.

The structure for the conference evolved from 3 key ideas:

- First, students use school assignments, especially open-ended ones, to tackle important problems in which they are personally interested. Sometimes these problems are the same ones that the teacher has assigned them to work on, sometimes not.
- Second, we can only begin to see and understand the serious work that students undertake if we suspend judgment long enough to look carefully and closely at what is actually in the work rather than what we hope to see in it.
- Third, we need the perspective of others — especially those who are not intimate with our goals for our students — to help us to see aspects of the student and the work that would otherwise escape us. We need others to help us generate ideas about how to use this information to shape our daily practice.

Since 1988, when Steve Seidel and his colleagues at Project Zero developed this process, the Collaborative Assessment Conference has been used in a variety of ways: to give teachers the opportunity to hone their ability to look closely at and interpret students' work; to explore the strengths and needs of a particular child; to reflect on the work collected in student portfolios; and to foster conversations among faculty about the kind of work students are doing and how faculty can best support that work.

In the Collaborative Assessment Conference, the presenting teacher brings a piece of student work to share with a group of 5-10 colleagues (usually other teachers and administrators). The process begins with the presenting teacher showing (or distributing copies of) the piece to the group. Throughout the first part of the conference, the presenting teacher says nothing, giving no information about the student, the assignment, or the context in which the student worked.

Through a series of questions asked by the facilitator, the group works to understand the piece by describing it in detail and looking for clues that would suggest the problems, issues, or aspects of the work with which the student was most engaged. They do this without judgments about the quality of work or how it suits their personal tastes. The facilitator helps this process by asking participants to point out the evidence on which they based the judgments that inevitably slip out. For example, if someone comments that the work seems very creative, the facilitator might ask him or her to describe the aspect of the work that led him or her to say that.

In the second part of the conference, the focus broadens. Having concentrated intensively on the piece itself, the group, in conversation with the presenting teacher, now considers the conditions under which the work was created as well as broader issues of teaching and learning. First, the presenting teacher provides any information that she/he thinks is relevant about the context of the work. This might include describing the assignment, responding to the discussion, answering questions (though she/he does not have to respond to all the questions raised in the first part of the conference), describing other work by the child, and/or commenting on how her/his own reading or observation of the work compares to that of the group.

Next, the facilitator asks the whole group (presenting teacher included) to reflect on the ideas generated by the discussion of the piece. These might be reflections about specific next steps for the child in question, ideas about what the participants might do in their own classes, or thoughts about the teaching and learning process in general. Finally, the whole group reflects on the conference itself.

The following steps are a working agenda for a Collaborative Assessment Conference. The time allotted for each step of the conference is not fixed, since the time needed for each step will vary in accordance with the work being considered. At each stage, the facilitator should use his or her judgment in deciding when to move the group on to the next step.



Collaborative Assessment Conference Protocol

Developed by Steve Seidel and colleagues at Harvard Project Zero.

1. Getting Started

- The group chooses a facilitator who will make sure the group stays focused on the particular issue addressed in each step.
- The presenting teacher puts the selected work in a place where everyone can see it or provides copies for the other participants. She/he says nothing about the work, the context in which it was created, or the student, until Step 5.
- The participants observe or read the work in silence, perhaps making brief notes about aspects of it that they particularly notice.

2. Describing the Work

- The facilitator asks the group: "What do you see?"
- Group members provide answers without making judgments about the quality of the work or their personal preferences.
- If a judgment emerges, the facilitator asks for the evidence on which the judgment is based.

3. Asking Questions About the Work

- The facilitator asks the group: "What questions does this work raise for you?"
- Group members state any questions they have about the work, the child, the assignment, the circumstances under which the work was carried out, and so on.
- The presenting teacher may choose to make notes about these questions, but she/he does not respond to them now — nor is she/he obligated to respond to them in Step 5 during the time when the presenting teacher speaks.

4. Speculating About What the Student is Working On

- The facilitator asks the group, "What do you think the child is working on?"
- Participants, based on their reading or observation of the work, make suggestions about the problems or issues that the student might have been focused on in carrying out the assignment.

5. Hearing from the Presenting Teacher

- The facilitator invites the presenting teacher to speak.
- The presenting teacher provides his or her perspective on the student's work, describing what she/he sees in it, responding (if she/he chooses) to one or more of the questions raised, and adding any other information that she/he feels is important to share with the group.
- The presenting teacher also comments on anything surprising or unexpected that she/he heard during the describing, questioning, and speculating phases.

6. Discussing Implications for Teaching and Learning

The facilitator invites everyone (the participants and the presenting teacher) to share any thoughts they have about their own teaching, children's learning, or ways to support this particular child in future instruction.

7. Reflecting on the Collaborative Assessment Conference

The group reflects on the experiences of the conference as a whole or particular parts of it.

8. Thanks to the Presenting Teacher