

Collaborative Assessment Conference

From *Looking Together at Student Work*. Blythe, Allen, & Powell.
[Teachers College Press](#) (1999).

Since its development by Steve Seidel and colleagues at [Harvard Project Zero](#) in 1988, the Collaborative Assessment Conference has been used for a variety of purposes: to hone teachers' ability to look closely at and to interpret students' work; to explore the strengths and needs of a particular child; to reflect on the work collected in student portfolios; to foster conversations among faculty about the work students are doing and how to support that work.

The Collaborative Assessment Conference provides a structure for teachers to look together at a piece of work, first to determine what it reveals about the student and the issues that student cares about, and then to consider the implications of that student's issues and concerns for teaching and learning in general. The structure for the conference evolved from three key ideas:

- **First, students use the 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. This means that a piece of student work has the potential to reveal not only the student's mastery of class goals, but also a wealth of information about the student, including his or her intellectual interests, strengths, and struggles.
- **Second, adults can only begin to see and understand the serious work that students undertake if they **suspend judgment long enough to look carefully** and closely at what is actually in the work, rather than what they hope or expect to see in it.**
- **Third, teachers need the perspectives of others** (especially those who are not familiar with their students or classroom contexts) to help reveal the many facets of a student's work and to help generate ideas about how to use this information to shape daily practice.

In Collaborative Assessment Conferences, the presenting teacher brings a piece of student work to share with a group of five to ten 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.

Collaborative Assessment Conference (Continued)

Through a series of questions asked by the facilitator (such as, "What do you see in the work?"), the group works to understand the piece by describing it in detail, raising questions about it, and speculating about the problems or issues with which the student was most engaged. They do this without making evaluations about the quality of the work or its appeal to their personal tastes. The facilitator helps this process by asking participants to point out the evidence in the work 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 the participants 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 thinks is relevant about the contexts for the work. This might include describing the assignment, responding to the discussion, answering questions raised in the first part of the conference (though the presenting teacher can choose which of those questions to respond to), and describing other **work by the child**, and/or commenting on how her own reading or observation of the work compares to that of the group's.

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, or 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.

Collaborative Assessment Conference (Continued)

Below is 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 according to the work being considered. At each stage, the facilitator makes the decision about when to move the group on to the next step. Typically, Collaborative Assessment Conferences take from 45 minutes to an hour and 15 minutes.

I. 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 says nothing about the work, the context in which it was created, or the student until Step V.
- The participants observe or read the work in silence, perhaps making brief notes about aspects of it that they particularly notice.

II. Describing the work

- The facilitator asks the group, “What do you see?”
- Group members respond without making interpretations, evaluations about the quality of the work, or statements of personal preference.
- If evaluations or interpretations emerge, the facilitator asks the person to describe the evidence on which those comments are based.

III. Asking questions about the work

- The facilitator asks the group, “What questions does this work raise for you?”
- Group members state any question they have about the work, the child, the assignment, the circumstances under which the work was carried out, and so on.
- The presenting teacher makes notes about these questions (but does not answer them yet).

IV. Speculating about what the student is working on

- The facilitator asks the group, “What do you think the child is working on?”
- Participants, drawing on their observation of the work, make suggestions about the problems or issues that the student focused on in carrying out the assignment.

V. Hearing from the presenting teacher

- The facilitator invites the participating teacher to speak.
- The presenting teacher provides her perspective on the student’s work, describing what she sees in it, responding to questions raised, and adding any other information that she feels is important to share with the group.
- The presenting teacher also comments on anything surprising or unexpected that she heard during the describing, questioning, and speculating phases.

VI. Reflecting on the CAC and thanking the presenting teacher

- The group reflects together on their experiences of or reactions to the conference as a whole or to particular parts of it.
- The session concludes with acknowledgment of and thanks to the presenting teacher.