

All About Accountability / The Lowdown on Learning Progressions

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Education authorities are now identifying learning progressions as a potent way to help teachers plan and monitor their instruction and, as a result, enhance their students' learning. A learning progression is a carefully sequenced set of building blocks that students must master *en route* to mastering a more distant curricular aim. These building blocks consist of subskills and bodies of enabling knowledge. Typically, learning progressions are constructed on the basis of some sort of backward analysis. An educator first identifies a significant curricular aim and then asks, "What does a student need to know or be able to do to master this aim?" The educator identifies one necessary building block and then asks, "What does a student need to know or be able to do to master this building block?" This sort of backward analysis can isolate the key tasks a student must accomplish on the way to mastery. Teachers should, of course, sequence the learning progression's building blocks in a pedagogically defensible order.

Learning progressions are useful for several compelling reasons. First, identifying "must-learn" building blocks enables teachers to plan instructional sequences that give students systematic rather than sporadic opportunities to master each building block in the learning progression. If the teacher has a clear road map that designates pivotal stops along the way, it is far easier to incorporate those stops. Second, such analyses can form the framework for an optimally effective formative assessment process. Formative assessment provides evidence, routinely gathered during ongoing instruction, that helps teachers adjust their instruction and students adjust their learning tactics. The formative assessment process will be far more successful if teachers *systematically* collect evidence of a student's progress toward mastery of each key building block in a learning progression. If a student is having trouble with building blocks, assessments can pinpoint why.

Novice users of learning progressions should consider three common issues related to these tools. First, with few exceptions, there is no single, universally accepted and absolutely correct learning progression underlying any given high-level curricular aim. Educators can develop slightly different learning progressions for an identical curricular outcome, based on their learners, their existing expertise and their background knowledge. Happily, almost any carefully conceived learning progression is likely to benefit students than unconnected learning episodes.

A second important factor is selecting an appropriate grain size for the progression's building blocks. When a teacher sets out to develop a learning progression for a given aim, he or she often begins to truly understand the subtleties underlying a student's mastery of that aim. But learning progressions that capture all the nuances of a student's journey toward mastery typically turn out to be far too complex. Most education authorities suggest that learning progressions should contain only those subskills and bodies of enabling knowledge that represent the most significant building blocks. Overly detailed learning progressions are off-putting to potential users—what teacher or student wants to tackle 20 or more can dos? The best learning progressions are fashioned according to a less-is-more model.

Finally, anyone embarking on the use of learning progressions should recognize that creating first-rate learning progressions is far from child's play. Isolating and sequencing the building blocks underlying students' attainment of a challenging curricular aim requires thoughtful effort.