

THE COLLABORATIVE ASSESSMENT CONFERENCE

National School Reform Faculty/Project Zero

The COLLABORATIVE ASSESSMENT CONFERENCE (CAC) has been used for a variety of purposes: to look closely at and interpret students' work; to explore the strengths and needs of a particular student; and to reflect on the work collected in student portfolios. In addition, the CAC fosters conversations among faculty about the work students are doing and how to support that work. If a presenter is wondering about a particular student, and wants other people's perspectives on the student, the structure of the CAC will likely provide useful feedback.

The Collaborative Assessment Conference provides a structure for teachers to look together at a piece of student 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 student's name should be off the work, and the presenter will usually have richer insights if there aren't any teacher comments that might bias the group on the work, either. 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 (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 could 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), 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 student 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.