

Executive Summary: Evaluating the Effectiveness of “At-elbow” Facilitation as a Model to Support Enhanced Classroom Assessment Capacity

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Background and Purpose

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of a prototype model of at-elbow facilitation designed to enhance classroom assessment practice and instructional leadership practice. This work was undertaken from a grant provided by Alberta Education to the Alberta Assessment Consortium (AAC) and aimed to enhance practice in a way that was both sustainable and scalable. As part of the at-elbow model, AAC facilitators guided and supported teacher cohorts while assisting individuals towards self-sufficiency in cohorts at different sites in Alberta.

This research sought to evaluate the model used during the AAC's work with schools, including: (a) the role of facilitators who acted as supports for both content and process learning founded within the model used to promote growth in assessment; (b) understandings and learnings collected as data from participants as a way to better understand the work of both teachers with the cohorts and AAC facilitators who worked "at-elbow" with the school-based teachers who participated; and, (c) the stories of those relationships – including successes and difficulties as at-elbow AAC facilitators worked with site-based teachers as they employed the model together.

The research attempted to better understand cohorts' and teachers' stories of their work towards enhanced assessment practices and the value of the at-elbow model to increase assessment capacity. This research hopes to inform recommendations for shaping a model of facilitator at-elbow coaching that could be used beyond these prototyping sites - and to inform future steps working towards enhanced classroom assessment capacity across the province and beyond.

Research Question. The research question was: "Did the Alberta Assessment Consortium's model of 'at-elbow' facilitation, as used in five cohort sites in Alberta, support enhanced classroom assessment capacity?"

Conceptual Framework and Research Methodology

Appreciative inquiry. As researchers, we chose appreciative inquiry (AI) as our research methodology because we believed it best fit the model and goals the AAC was working to establish. As a research methodology, the basic principle of AI is affirmation and the basic goal is to find solutions. AI (a) helps discover elements and factors in any group that have enabled success, and (b) builds upon those elements and factors to improve the future.

Primary Research Method: Focus Groups. We chose *focus groups* (small-group discussions) as our main data collection method because they allowed us to learn participants' beliefs about the topic. Focus group interviews took the form of facilitated conversations that occurred in nonthreatening environments (within their previously-established cohorts) where participants were actively invited to share their opinions. These focus groups were open-ended, broad, and qualitative. They engaged participants in a topic in depth, with its nuances.

Participants. Participants were selected from cohorts who had worked with the AAC. Participants in this research study came from four cohorts of teachers. Originally, we intended to involve six cohorts; however, unexpected circumstances forced one to drop out; and, after two

data-collection trips to one cohort site, it was agreed that the cohort had not engaged in enough work with the assessment facilitator to generate data that usefully answered the research question. We eliminated data we had collected from this cohort.

Cohort descriptions

Cohort 1 was a cohort of teachers who worked at the same school; it was a mix of first- and second-year members. During the first year of the cohort, two teachers with a long history of working together began to work with the AAC facilitator. During the second year, two other teachers joined the cohort. All teachers taught the same grade.

Cohort 2 consisted of four teachers. Three were new to the cohort, and one was returning. Cohort members were from different schools and taught different age levels and different discipline areas.

Cohort 3 consisted of a core of three teachers who continued to work in the model during the second year. All cohort members taught at different schools, in different subject areas, and at different age levels.

Cohort 4 consisted of five members from the same school. The group members taught different age levels of students and different classes; however, all members taught in the math/science discipline areas.

Research Methods Synopsis. The research utilized research observations, as well as qualitative data collected from individual teacher participant response sheets and focus group conversations. All data were collected during 2016. First, data were collected from a focus group interview with AAC facilitators prior to the data collection rounds with cohorts. Next, data were collected in two rounds at four different cohort sites.

During the first round of cohort data collection, the researcher shared the purpose and philosophy of the research project, the ethical aspects of the study, and answered questions participants had about the study. All participants signed an ethics release form. To collect data, a response sheet was given to participants, and participants were asked to fill out this sheet choosing the three questions (of several) they believed best helped them address the question of impact of the at-elbow model on their assessment capacity. These response sheets were then used as notes for a focus group conversation. The researcher also took notes during the focus group discussion. After the focus group discussion, participants were asked to review and summarize their thoughts from the focus group on a second response sheet, which was collected. The researcher debriefed each round-one data collection with another research team member that day or the next.

All response sheets were scanned and copies shared with members of the research team. The research team was instructed to read and analyze this data, and then met to discuss both the data and the researcher's observations from the round of data collection. Research team members' insights and notes were shared, discussed, and catalogued. Gaps or areas of needed expansion of the data collected were noted. This research team meeting was used to design the second round of data collection.

During round-two data collection, the researcher again met with each cohort group to share the findings, confirm that these findings accurately represented what the cohort reported during round one data collection, and informed cohort members of further needed data. A third response sheet was given to participants used to inform the second focus group discussion that followed. Again, the researcher also took notes during that focus group discussion and almost immediately debriefed each cohort's data collection with a second research team member. All response sheets were scanned and copies shared with research team members. The research team read and analyzed this second set of data, and then met to discuss the data and the researcher's observations from the focus group.

After writing an interim report, the researchers met with the AAC and decided to extend the study to gain further data. During this extension, cohort members were interviewed a third time: one cohort at AAC's annual conference, one individual via telephone, and the remainder during in-person, individual interviews. We taped, transcribed the tapes, and analyzed the sessions and reshaped the research report in collaboration with AAC leadership. Finally, research team members discussed all the collected data and engaged in answering the research question together. A final report was written based upon all the feedback from the AAC and our research team conversations. Two different interim reports were written and shared with the Alberta Assessment Consortium. The final report was delivered to the Alberta Assessment Consortium and shared with the project Working Group, an advisory body consisting of stakeholder representatives who have been involved with the project since its inception in 2015.

Research Findings

This research study revealed a number of main findings. These included:

Area 1: The Work of Facilitators

Finding 1: The facilitators' role was valued. AAC facilitators described their roles as working to:

- clarify goals;
- create safe spaces/environment;
- hold spaces where groups could 'gel';
- explore how the work fit teachers' current paradigms;
- honor the personal agenda (teachers' professional learning);
- encourage voice and choice versus a school agenda (if they conflicted);
- build a common starting point from a shared teaching background (facilitators were/are teachers, too);
- balance support and momentum: patient support pushing practice; and,
- find openings: redirect focus when work/conversation strayed and "nudge" conversations forward.

Participants also valued the role of facilitators; however, participants added activities to how facilitators described their own roles. According to participants' sheets and follow-up conversations, the AAC assessment facilitators' roles included working to:

- challenge “traditional ways of knowing”: impart knowledge that changed the participants' paradigms;
- provide an outside perspective;
- provide resources and examples;
- keep the participants accountable—on track and focused;
- guide, clarify, and offer feedback;
- create a space for collaboration;
- increase confidence to better understand assessment;
- encourage personal awareness of assessment growth; and,
- support change through validation and encouragement.

Finding 2: To be effective, facilitators needed a number of qualities. Participants listed several desirable qualities facilitators need to make their work successful:

- knowledge and competence;
- empathy, trustworthiness, openness, and lack of judgment;
- ability to be engaging;
- time-management and strong speaking skills;
- ability to offer tips, techniques, and anecdotes;
- respect, respectfulness, and mindfulness;
- focus and ability to hold the participants accountable for individual goals and objectives through frequent conversations, one-on-one meetings, and group meetings; and, an
- ability to create a safe and nurturing community.

Area 2: The Impact of the Model

Finding 1: The increased time teacher participants worked with the AAC facilitators increasingly shaped their conversations, behavior, and work in positive ways. The finding of ‘the importance of the facilitator,’ requires trust and common sense because no direct correlation can be drawn. This finding follows a logical set of steps (the slinky effect) that recognizes how the role and skills of the facilitator influenced participants by (a) providing support and initiating momentum, resulting in (b) the participants' confidence to be transparent about their growing assessment practices and (c) an ability for participants to better engage all students. Finally, changes in participant practice impacted their students; participants observed (d) increased student learning and satisfaction.

Finding 2: The original first-year video component was a key event. The first-year video component was a key event that encouraged participants to pull their own ideas and insights together. That event allowed the AAC to collect and share insights, but participants repeatedly noted that the video component provided a valuable synthesis opportunity that allowed them to “settle” their own insights together.

Finding 3: The cohort structure and organization are important. Several components of the cohort structure and organization proved crucial to ensuring the facilitation model helped increase assessment capacity. These included that (a) participation and collaboration in the

model was voluntary; (b) the power of a positively functioning collaborative group; c) the power of gentle accountability; and, (d) the fact that the model started outside of the classroom space, but moved into the classroom space.

Finding 4: The transformative power of formative assessment is reaffirmed. During this research, the increased use of formative assessment helped teachers focus on students they typically might have missed. Specifically, the use of formative assessment allowed students who had seldom succeeded in class to demonstrate their learning. Second, formative assessment required constant conversations, which worked to increase assessment capacity. Third, participants reported that they solidified assessment as a valid discipline of study.

Finding 5: Teachers found the “pull-out” format for professional learning conversations beneficial. First, the “pull-out” format for professional learning conversations proved beneficial because it helped participants build conversational communities of practice, where they felt safe to converse critically and creatively. Second, the cohorts came to work together past the project – both as critical friends and friends. Third, the dedicated time for working together as a cohort proved to be important. Consistently, participants voiced how dedicated meeting time was influential, creating support that allowed their assessment capacity to grow. In short, the cohort groups provided collaborative structure with support. As importantly, it provided a gentle accountability the participants appreciated. Knowing they would be coming together as a group encouraged participants to prioritize the work in their busy schedules and stay focused on their assessment goals.

Additionally, the reflective practice built into the AAC model was important. This aspect of the AAC model helped overcome the knowing-doing gap, and resulted in shifts in participant practice versus a shift limited to theory or understanding. Although there was a necessary first step in building a theoretical understanding, the reflective practice aspect of the model seemed to help nudge and support the participants to enhance their assessment capacity in ways that led to changes in classroom practice.

Finding 6: Teachers hoped for expanded AAC facilitator work. Specifically, teacher participants hoped the AAC facilitator would advocate the importance of formative assessment to other parts of their division. Some participants did not yet feel they were ready to engage their new learnings more broadly within their divisions.

Finding 7: The model’s success “hints at” further possibilities for professional development. The model showed how teachers’ work in formative assessment can become transformative teacher professional learning. As researchers, we saw beginning border crossings as teachers’ informal reputations for their increased pedagogical insights grew within their district.

Finding 8: Teachers were excited by their increased learning and were more than willing to share it with others. The experienced participants learned more about their own teaching. In some ways, the teachers themselves were at odds with their own beliefs so they could not share their work with other teachers. For example, in reflection, questions arise that are interesting.

- (a) Why do teachers seem hesitant to share their new/growing understandings with colleagues? We observed this when participants described how they would share resources and ideas only if teacher colleagues sought them out.
- (b) In one cohort, none of the participants from that cohort had joined a school committee focused specifically on school-based assessment reform. Why did participants clearly value their own professional growth in assessment capacity, yet seemed reluctant to celebrate and share that growth in ways that might help others?
- (c) How can the work be “scaled out” and draw in participants who are not already convinced of the importance of the power of building assessment capacity? Most participants had already been interested in assessment and/or collaborative work before their experience with the AAC Assessment Facilitators. How can this model be scaled out in a way that can attract participants who are less convinced about the importance of building one's assessment capacity?

Further Research

Much research remains to be completed. First, more research is needed about how to increase both teacher assessment practice and capacity. Findings from this research are limited for two reasons: (a) because of the short history of the work of AAC’s assessment facilitators with teacher collaborative cohorts and (b) because of small sample size. What differences would occur between cohorts who continue to work together from year to year? Might a year-three cohort bridge assessment practices into school-based assessment? Is the work scalable to larger groups?

Second, more research is needed into how teacher professional learning are best engaged using at-elbow coaching. What, from this study and from further studies, can help us better shape teacher professional learning?

Third, more research is needed about how to best utilize professional educational experts. There are many educational experts: how can educational expertise best be used to forward the needs of a large educational system?

Fourth, a potentially complex area of research emerged from this research. Specifically, schools remain complex cultures that participants reported might be more difficult to change than their own classrooms. Hence, participants desired that the AAC become “ambassadors” for system change. If so, how might the complex culture of schools impact the scalability of these research findings?