CASE STUDY

Midterm conversations as co-creation of equitable and inclusive formative assessment

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ABSTRACT

Although assessment of student learning remains a thorny area for co-creation in education, a growing number of researchers and practitioners advocate and enact partnership in formative and summative assessment as part of equity work. In this case study, we join these efforts in reflecting on students' and our own experiences of the midterm conversation that we use as a key formative assessment structure and process across three co-facilitated courses. The midterm conversation—a partnership among students and instructors as co-teachers—is embedded in course design and curriculum with the goal of advancing, informing, and sustaining our pedagogical commitments. This case illustrates how we practice assessment as dialogue and as emergent understanding. This practice is based on an expectation of diverse learning goals and outcomes and on trust in students' capacities to direct their learning with reference to their own interests and standards for their work.

KEYWORDS

formative assessment, co-creation, relational learning, student agency, dialogue

"To me, the mid-semester conference didn't feel like an assessment, rather a conversation." (Student reflection)

Assessment of student learning remains a thorny area for co-creation because it is among the most "highly guarded and protected" features of higher education and "one of the last holdouts of sole faculty ownership" (Curtis & Anderson, 2021, p. 56). Nevertheless, a growing number of researchers and practitioners advocate and enact partnership in assessment as part of equity work (Cook-Sather, 2021; Dargusch et al., 2023; Del Rosso & Nordstrom-Wehner, 2020; Guberman, 2020; Whysel, 2022). In our teaching practice and in this paper, we join these efforts as two faculty members and two former students-turned-staff colleagues and co-facilitators. In the context of an undergraduate education department in two small liberal arts colleges in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, we co-facilitate among us three courses. In each, we use midterm conversations—which we refer to as conversations and conferences in this case study—

in lieu of exams or assignments as a key formative assessment. The midterm conversations, enacted in partnership with pairs of enrolled students and pairs of us as co-facilitators of each course, are embedded in course design and curriculum and advance and inform our pedagogical commitments.

This case is an example of what Bovill (2020) defines as whole-class co-creation: "inviting a whole group of students who are studying together . . . to actively collaborate and negotiate with the teacher and each other . . . elements of the learning process," including assessment and evaluation (p. 1025). "Assessment" here refers to an inclusive approach to gaining insight into how students are progressing in relation to their own and course standards and learning goals. As others have shown, inclusive assessment practices invite students to show learning in differing ways, with options for flexibility and choice (Dargusch et al., 2023; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020; Morris et al., 2019). We are committed to practicing assessment as a form of both dialogue and emergent understanding. Our midterm conversations follow from this commitment and are based on diverse learning goals and outcomes as well as on trust in students' capacities to direct their own learning.

We have long worked to de-center traditional grading through ungrading, alternative assessment, and partnership in our courses (Cook-Sather et al., 2003; Lesnick et al., 2007). Extending the work of co-creation of assessment between instructors and student partners (Cook-Sather, 2022; Deeley & Bovill, 2017; Deeley & Brown, 2014), we find whole-class partnership with students through midterm conversations a powerful way to restore ourselves and foster communities of learning—rather than reproduce a traditional, reductive, and punitive process focused on product and productivity. (For a cogent discussion of the harms of normative grading, see Del Rosso & Nordstrom-Wehner, 2020).

This case study includes the reflections of both instructors and students. Through our work over 4 years of developing the midterm conversations and through sharing this case study, we hope to encourage students and educators in co-owning learning and uplifting, in particular, the role of peers in this process. The specific practice we examine here has an instructional aim and a systems-impact aim. We hope that students, having practiced shared authority for their own learning, will carry this capacity into other facilitation roles.

THE PRACTICE AND ITS EVOLUTION

The midterm conversations grow out of a broader context in each of the undergraduate education courses in which we employ them. All three of these courses have an enrollment cap of 22 because they have field placement/partnership components. At the start of the semester, and on the syllabus, we articulate how assessment, including students' self-assessment, works in each course. For Community Learning Collaborative: Practicing Partnership (EDUC 200), there are no grades assigned throughout the semester, and enrolled students self-assess and propose a final grade for themselves, which is considered alongside the summative assessment of co-facilitators. For Exploring and Enacting Transformation of Higher Education (EDUC 295), grades are also not assigned throughout the semester, and co-facilitators and enrolled students co-create grades using the Course Commitment Form each student completes (see Cook-Sather, 2022 for details) as those intersect with course and learning goals identified by co-facilitators and enrolled students. For Inquiries Into Black Study, Language Justice, and Education (EDUC 308), a

portfolio approach to grading is taken, with some assignments graded and others completed as credit/no credit. A final course grade integrates these together with students' self-assessments at mid- and end of term, with reference to instructor-generated and co-created standards.

As part of this assessment culture, we began holding midterm conversations in 2018. Originally, one student at a time would meet with the two course facilitators. Early in the pandemic as we moved to Zoom, we built a system of learning partners (also called accountability partners, see Cook-Sather, 2023) into each of our courses in order to support students' connection with one another and shared navigation and meaning-making in the courses. A year into this format, we decided to blend the midterm-conversation approach with the learning-partner approach and asked students to join the midterm conversations in learning-partner dyads. A semester later, we began opening the midterm conversations with the invitation to students to share something they had learned from or learned through working with their partner. This became an explicit way to value interactive, peer-to-peer learning. Table 1 outlines the format of the midterm conversations.

Table 1. Format of midterm conversation

WHAT STUDENTS ARTICULATE	WHAT CONVERSATION INCLUDES
Relational learning	Each student shares something they have learned from or learned through working with their learning partner.
What and how much they are learning	Each student discusses the central elements, as well as the depth, of their learning in the course so far.
Learning standards	Students each describe what standards they hold for their learning and how they assess progress toward meeting them.
Goal setting for learning to come	Students discuss focal topics and action steps for the second half of the course and how these meet their own and course standards.

Throughout, co-facilitators reflect, invite, question, challenge, and affirm students' discussion as needed.

CO-FACILITATORS' MOTIVES AND EXPERIENCES

Just as our approach validates students' individualities among the collective, our collaboration as co-educators makes room for our own.

Defining her work—over almost 40 years as an educator, student of education, learner, and program builder—as rooted in collaboration and shared empowerment with people across varying identities, experiences, and roles, Alice values learning from her colleagues and students in real time during the conferences. She finds that participating as a listener as well as speaker changes the character of assessment by decentering judging, which can readily, via culture and

conditioning, attach to being a white teacher. It also positions each participant as a creative, authorizing agent, unsettling hierarchies, which is one of her interests.

For Sabea—a facilitator whose work developing partnerships and curricula centers the interests and innovations of Black and Indigenous communities—the midterm conversations help map and revise pedagogy to be more attuned with actual vs projected course take-aways for students. The conversations help reorient academic spaces away from transaction and rework who has authority to affirm, critique, and focus attention. Forefronting a witnessing of each student's gratitude for and critique of the other's work generatively destabilizes traditional punitive dynamics of instructors/teachers having the most important or powerful feedback, as well as provides more bespoke and productive language models for giving/receiving feedback to encourage progress. This co-created model of education centers consent and community, in turn motivating more feedback, revision, and growth.

For Margo, who has spent 12 years in a range of education roles—a classroom teacher, community educator and organizer for education justice, and staff member within the Education Department—the midterm conversations are a chance to practice the commitment to understanding and doing accountability outside of punitive systems in order to generate and further abolitionist and restorative possibilities. She reflects how conferences can allow genuine accountability. This accounting cannot be forced or threatened into being, but *can* emerge when mechanisms of compliance are drawn back and trust in oneself and each other is cultivated. Sometimes in classrooms the haunt of grading lingers; it is internalized. So, the conversations become an important time for inner trust and intra-relational trust to ripen and more relationally-meaningful standards to take form.

Drawing on 35 years of experience as a secondary then tertiary educator, teacher educator, and facilitator of a student-faculty pedagogical partnership program, Alison has moved steadily toward a dialogic model of teaching and learning. She finds that the midterm conversations support listening as much as talking, being guided by as much as guiding, learning as much as teaching. She sees these ways of engaging, both required and inspired by student voice and pedagogical partnership, as contributing to the assessment of student learning as a process of co-creation.

We understand a commitment to equity as including ourselves and surfacing our commitments. We value teaching without having to profess uniformity, which we know risks reaching for false and dehumanizing certainty.

METHOD: REFLECTING ON STUDENTS' RESPONSES

In considering students' experiences of the midterm conversations, we have reflected on students' comments in class discussions, course feedback during the semester, and exchanges during the conversations themselves. Using a form of Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) approach to reflexive thematic analysis, we read each source, selected quotations that captured students' experiences, mapped initial observations, and noted themes that emerged across student reflections. In thematizing some of this material, we mean to offer a take-off point for further, more structured research—our own and others'.

WAYS STUDENTS EXPERIENCE THE CONFERENCE MIDTERM CONVERSATION PROCESS

In Table 2, we offer a sample of selected topics that students identify in the midterm conversations and examples of student reflections on the conferences.

Table 2. Selected topics and student reflections

SELECTED TOPICS STUDENTS IDENTIFY	EXAMPLES OF STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON CONFERENCES
Themes of learning: examples of skills, content, and values learned	"The [midterm conversations] helped me get my thoughts together regarding what I had learned so far and what I wanted to bring moving forward in the course." "Working with someone who you meet with outside of class for an hour every week provided a sense of intimacy in showing my growth as a learner and student in the course through the use of multiple perspectives. . . . I think that humanistic component was crucial to the conferences because it felt like I had multiple systems of support, while also maintaining a certain level of critique that was productive in fostering growth in all of the included parties."
Gaining insight from learning partner and feeling inspired by their example to share ideas and questions more frankly	"It helped to hear directly from my partner how they felt about our sessions and about me." "I was able to discuss my progress in the course and see if I was on the right track. I was also able to hear what my learning partner had been working on and could compare with her."
Insights about the personal character of learning	"I loved that both [instructors] reflected pieces of our conversation back to my learning partner and me so we could hear the importance and impact of the ideas we were sharing." "The educators not only instruct us in the course material, but allow for our voices to be heard as if we were genuinely and retroactively crucial in the format of the course."
Next steps articulated, for example, to continue or deepen participation in course activities as an active learner	"I think it could be helpful and also fun to incorporate a learning partner check out at the end of the class to reflect on what we've learned during that class." "Share the potential questions/discussion points ahead of the conference so that we have a little more time to reflect on them before we meet!"

Midterm conversations tend to emphasize future rather than past steps. Students leave the conversations with a sense of direction for their further coursework. This form of midterm formative assessment draws focus toward what students have put into place to build with—in ways like and unlike those of their learning partner.

In addition, as students discuss what and how deeply they are learning, they situate themselves in a less hierarchical field than they would when assessed by a single scale of

achievement. Certain themes recur; and yet, there is no uniform takeaway. Students recognize and express differences in relation to another person's learning without striving for uniformity or competitive comparisons.

CHALLENGES

For most students arriving through the admission process to our classrooms, grades have been a central organizer of learning. Some students have previous experience with similar models of self-assessment, some heartily welcome the opportunity to center their own standards for learning, and others express discomfort with the process. Many students have not before been asked, "In lieu of grades, what standards do you hold for your own learning?" We recall one student, for example, who spoke directly in class to this discomfort in saying that she would try it out but knew that she was used to getting validation from grades. The midterm conversations, then, are a lab time to cultivate attention to self-defined standards, to provide examples of what learnings "count," and to build the muscle of self-authorized assessment.

Further, some students are used to framing flexibility and responsiveness as a lack of necessary structure or rigor. If we do not clarify this tendency early and often, we can lose their engagement and their confidence in the process. As one student articulated in the anonymous feedback we invited for this paper, "I think there would be a benefit in including a more 'concrete' component. At times, I did feel like there was a sense of 'too much' freedom (not to say that is a bad thing!) in the [midterm conversation]." Both a challenge and a place of engagement for students is in relation to how we might rethink education as experiential rather than dogmatic, deepen awareness of the diverse impacts of schooling on individuals, families, and communities, and recognize problems with conventional narratives about marginalized and minoritized learners.

The midterm conversations enact a vision of practice that welcomes risks—including those of uncertainty and unpredictability, awkwardness, surprise, and disappointment (Bovill, 2020; Guberman, 2020)—as part of life and learning. To move toward more authentic accounts of our learning and experiences, we also risk facing our own and others' shortcomings—the places and instances where we did not meet our standards or where we disagree about this. In practice, these conferences pose a question: what can we respond to these disappointments with, besides and beyond punishment?

Midterm conversations become a space for trust to take shape, but it is not automatic. We often sense an unstated question from students: Do you mean it, that my own standards matter? You are not tricking me, planning to punish me with a bad grade or surprise me and tell me I am failing, on the back end? As one student commented in the anonymous feedback,

> I like that the [midterm conversations] don't feel at all punitive—I was a little scared that they would be since generally a one-on-one meeting with an educator is because something is wrong (which probably says something about society idk).

CONCLUSION: FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS AND EMERGING NEXT STEPS

The traditional system of grades discourages both creative agency and deep relationality in learning (Guberman, 2020). With the midterm conversations, we do not have to wait for an institutional fix; we can step outside of this system by fostering students' agency. As one student powerfully put it:

> I had a wonderful meeting with Alison where I realized my north star! I figured out the framing and theme of my engagement in this course has been rooted in thinking about my role in the transformation of higher education. I have come to understand I am the seed (one of many!!)! I have the agency to lead the change I want to experience.

The partnership approach taken in the conferences balances individual leadership with intersubjective accountability.

Currently, the points of increased clarity for us are these:

- Taking steps into partnership-based assessment gives us encouragement to keep going and to loosen from the sense that we have to see the end at the start in order to begin (Horton & Freire, 1990). Rather than be confined by institutional norms, we can continue entering into other modes of assessment, encouraging our and our students' skill and experience around them to grow.
- We plan to offer students more scaffolding—a more explicit guide into and out of the midterm conversations. Because the focus on personal standards for and self-direction in learning is relatively new for most students, we see that students could benefit from more preparation for and reflection on the conversations.
- We hope to build partnership more fully into the grading process of all the courses we teach, as we have done for many years in EDUC 295. We are considering a continuum that encompasses directly inviting students to articulate and drive work from their own learning goals as well as fashioning a collective grading system at the beginning of a semester that relates to these goals and informs the grades registered at the end.

In research to come, we anticipate drawing more centrally and systematically on students' experiences of the midterm conversations. Our goal in this paper has been to share how we have turned to partnership as a way to wrestle with the problem of grading and how this allows us to learn from and with students and one another. We write in the same spirit as the practice itself—to show an aspect of our path and invite readers to associate it with their own. We are eager to continue conversation with those working similarly!

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