The Lowdown on Learning Progressions

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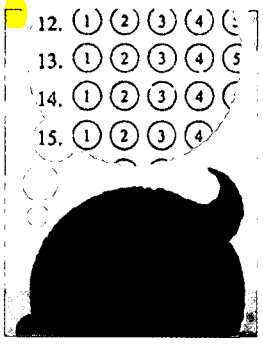
If you attend just about any education conference these days—whether it centers on curriculum, instruction, or assessment—you'll most likely encounter one or more presenters who tout the virtues of *learning progressions*. More and more education authorities are now identifying learning progressions 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. To illustrate, if a curricular aim calls for students to become skilled writers of persuasive essays, a learning progression for this aim might include a subskill that requires students to be able to craft supporting arguments for a given position. To master this subskill, students might need bodies of knowledge that enable them to understand certain spelling and punctuation rules or to use specific vocabulary—for example, *sound*, *valid*, and *justifiable*—associated with argumentation. The complete learning progression for a persuasive writing skill might include a half dozen subskills.

The best learning progressions are fashioned according to a less-is-more model.

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 popular 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. Teachers can collect this adjustment-focused evidence using either formal or informal assessment techniques—but they shouldn't collect such data on a whim. 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.

Neophyte users of learning progressions need to deal with 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. Thoughtful, well-intentioned educators can undertake task analyses for an identical curricular outcome, yet end up with strikingly different learning progressions. Happily, almost any carefully conceived learning progression is more likely to benefit students than teachers' off-the-cuff decision making.

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 instead of incorporating a seemingly endless array of minor subskills and knowledge, 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 en-route targets?—and unused learning progressions do not improve students' achievement. The best learning progressions are fashioned according to a less-is-more model.

Finally, anyone embarking on the use of this powerful analytic tool 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 rigorous cerebral effort. I encourage teachers to avoid carving out a learning progression at the end of a long teaching day—or during a less-than-lively faculty meeting!

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) has done some impressive pioneering work in this arena by developing learning progressions in many subject areas and for many age levels and providing practical guidelines regarding how such progressions can contribute to teachers' decision making. Our colleagues down under refer to learning progressions as *progress maps*. You can learn more about these Aussie efforts at www.acer.edu.au. EL

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