

Students in Ali Marks' English Language Arts class read 12 quotes, posted on the walls in the classroom, related to books they had read. Students formed two circles, an inner and an outer, based on which book they had read and discussed their reactions to the quotes. This self-guided learning and observing is an integral component to proficiency-based learning strategies.



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# PROFICIENCY-BASED TEACHING AND LEARNING IS CHANGING THE EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE FOR OREGON'S STUDENTS

BY **TIM BUCKLEY**

**I**N 2008, LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER ALLISON (ALI) MARKS noted that her Forest Grove High School students lacked the motivation, engagement, and skills she hoped for. After reflecting on her effectiveness and consulting with her principal, she was invited to explore Proficiency-based Teaching and Learning with the Business Education Compact (BEC).

At the other end of the state, Math teacher Mike Durrant hit the same wall. Test scores at Hidden Valley High School had hit bottom that year, with only 42 percent of tenth grade students passing the online OAKS test. The assistant principal put Durrant in charge of revitalizing the teaching model. Like Marks, he turned to Beaverton-based BEC for some ideas and training.

Over the past six years, proficiency-based teaching and learning (PBTL) has grown from infancy to adolescence in Oregon. “The drive for excellence has largely come from administrators and teachers’ pushing for adoption of ‘best practices,’ says Tamra Busch-Johnsen, Executive Director of the Business Education Compact (BEC). More than 1800 teachers have received PBTL training and technical assistance from BEC, and upwards of 50,000 students have had a proficiency classroom since 2005.

Early results show major gains in student achievement, reduction in dropout rates, improved attendance and major reductions in behavioral problems.

Marissa Vanderplaat, one of Marks’ students at Forest Grove High School says of PBTL, “I know what’s expected of me and I know what I have to do to get there,” she says. “Grades are more transparent, I don’t have a chance to fall behind, I’m more responsible for outcomes and...the funny thing about it...I don’t find school to be as stressful as I used to.”



In Hidden Valley, the addition of PBTL has propelled their math program beyond expectations. Durrant said that this year, 70 percent of tenth grade students passed the OAKS math test. The difference, he says, is their having adopted proficiency-based methods.

So promising is this development, the U.S. Department of Education’s application for the federal Race to the Top funding may feature proficiency as “a necessary path to improve student outcomes.”

### THE REFORM OF THE CENTURY

Back in 1906, the Carnegie Unit was instituted as a strategy to standardize US education. Based largely on an amalgam of credit hours, grade-point average and standardized exams, public school students got used to this system as a measure of their potential. Those who learned how to excel at it secured a spot in college and career.

Not long after man reached the moon, however, it became evident that the price of the Carnegie strategy was not meeting the needs of all learning styles. The cost of education had grown along with class sizes and class demographics, and academic rigor saw the impacts. Today, the Carnegie system is still largely in place, yet only two-thirds of freshmen graduate from Oregon high schools; less than half of high school graduates attend college; and, of those who start college, only half of them finish within six years.

In 1984, the year following the release of *A Nation at Risk*, BEC started in a small office provided by Tectonics Corporation. According to BEC’s Busch-Johnsen, “The catalyst was business people and Chambers of Commerce getting together and saying; ‘If we’re going to have economic development and a qualified workforce, we must help to create a strong educational system.’ The business-education partnership began modestly with the placement of 26 teachers in area businesses,” she says. That practice – helping teachers understand first-hand what skills are needed in the work environment – has continued to grow. “But until we stumbled on the proficiency education model in 2004, we were still nibbling at the edges of the problem,” Busch-Johnsen added. “We needed to get proficiency embedded into every classroom.”

Alongside BEC’s modest beginning, the Oregon Department of Education was meanwhile building a monumental foundation. Rigorous standards for core academic subjects, for essential skills and for career-related skills and behaviors have been in place

since the early 1990s, as have summative assessments (large-scale, statewide tests) to ascertain proficiency. In 2002, the Oregon State Board of Education adopted “Credit Options” that, for the first time, opened the door for student credit based on documented prior experience, independent study, internships, group projects and sample work products that demonstrate student skills and knowledge.

“Teachers began calling for a movement to redefine good teaching,” says Diane Smith, Director of BEC’s Teaching and Learning Initiative. “Additionally, they wanted more effective evaluation and quality reporting of student achievement. Our research, and now our experience, says that the proficiency model can do all three,” says Smith, who is a former teacher, school principal and district curriculum director in the Greater Albany School District.

“We have great state standards,” Smith explains, “but how am I – as a teacher or school principal – to know if, down the hall, others teaching the same subject are interpreting and teaching the standards the way I do? How do we know if the kids get it? What are we using as measurements of whether kids got it or not? If they can’t demonstrate learning, what’s in place to help them? If they can demonstrate proficiency in a shorter period of time, what can we do to not hold them back? How can we help them continue to learn at their own rate and move them on? And finally, when we are reporting progress and learning, how are we avoiding grade inflation by adding factors that are not academic...like attitude, effort, behavior, extra credit?”

### SOME CALL IT A PARADIGM SHIFT

Smith remembers her own experience in the “old” style classroom: “Way back when, I thought as a teacher that my responsibility was to teach Chapter 6, followed by Chapter 7 and Chapter 8. And when a chapter was done, I didn’t worry about who knew what...I was movin’ on.”

“And, when I got to a certain point on the calendar that said I have to issue a grade, I didn’t care whether student A needed an extra two weeks to get it and student B got it three weeks earlier; time was telling me ‘Time’s up.’ The calendar dictated measurement of student learning,” Smith says.

In a proficiency-based environment, there are four key questions teachers ask themselves:

- What do my students know?
- How do I know they know it?

Element	Beginning	Emerging	Proficient	Masters
Recognizes time as the variable and learning as the constant; adjusts classroom environment to meet students’ rate and level of learning	Teacher provides instruction based on all students learning at the same pace and moves ahead without checking to make sure each student is proficient.	Teacher expects all students to learn material at the same pace but is willing to reteach when the student brings the need to his/her attention.	Teacher paces instruction, adjusting to meet the needs of those not yet meeting the standards and those exceeding the standards.	Teacher and student develop a personalized learning plan that reflects an individual pathway to reaching and exceeding proficiency in all standards.



In PBL techniques, Ali Marks often takes a back-seat approach with her English Language Arts class, stepping in only when discussions start to flounder or to encourage specific students to speak up.

- ▣ What do I do if they don't know it?
- ▣ What do I do if they do know it?

“Proficiency practice has a number of distinctive attributes,” according to an article on the Oregon Proficiency Project. “It links curriculum, learning targets and lesson plans to high postsecondary standards. It involves students in understanding learning targets and the assessment process. It gauges student progress on an ongoing basis through formative assessment. And it allows students to learn at their own pace. Formative assessment includes test taking, but relies just as much on student presentations, student discussion, problem solving, group projects or other forms of evidence that the student has acquired proficiency.”

“Failure is not an option any longer,” says Smith. “Students merely keep working towards the standards until they demonstrate proficiency. A college admissions official told Oregon’s Credit for Proficiency Task Force that he’s rooting for faster adoption of a proficiency-based system because she has ‘no idea what high school grades indicate.’”

### TEACHERS SPEAK UP ON PROFICIENCY

Jessica Smith is a social studies teacher at West Albany High School and a BEC coach for other teachers.

*This is my 7th year of teaching. The first few years were purely survival mode. Last year, the school principal asked our Professional Learning Community to create a “scope and sequence” for a proficiency-based curriculum. That entailed determining which social studies standards to use, in which semesters and which classes. Beyond that, I took the extra step to “unwrap” each standard we chose, and asked the key questions: What do they need to know; and what do they have to show me to demonstrate their understanding?*

*I use formative assessments several times each class for all students. For example: how to use a map. They come with the familiarity of map legends and keys, so I don’t give that more than a quick review. To show proficiency, I’ll look for them to show proficiency in targeted things like: identification of different types of maps (and the purpose for each, along with the kind of information each yields), knowing when to use each type, creating their own map, plotting their own data on maps, etc.*

*I’ve got 39 freshmen this semester, and I have a wide range of students: IEPs and 504s needing lots of one-on-one attention; average kids and above average, highly directed kids. I wish I had more classroom computers for the more advanced ones, to turn them loose on independent projects in class. But, I’m fortunate to have some new technology that helps me assess quickly where everybody is – with individual CPS “clickers,” using a Power Point format and a Whiteboard, for example, I can ask people to answer a few quick questions that give me a good idea who gets it and who doesn’t....then I can develop activities for each group based on that feedback.*

*The administrative team at West Albany High School developed a block schedule for next year, to accommodate the next step in adopting proficiency: intervention classes. Seventh and eighth period will be for students needing extra time to gain proficiency, whether to re-take tests, get more tutoring, work on projects, etc.*

*I’ve been fortunate to be able to coach others, too, including Middle School Social Studies teachers. What I’ve found is that the number of standards in social studies, history in particular, is overwhelming! You can’t possibly unwrap and assess all of them in a year. So I worked with teachers to pick the strongest among the 39 standards. Then we developed lessons around those or, alternatively, combined lesser standards into larger ones.*





Forest Grove High School students discuss their reactions to a book assignment. In the background, a second set of students observe the discussion and take notes.

*While the first year of changing over to a proficiency model was challenging, the benefits have been worth the effort. What at first felt like more work became much smoother with practice. I'm now more confident in grading and more satisfied as a teacher.*

**MIKE DURRANT** is a math teacher and a secondary math coach at Hidden Valley High School in the Three Rivers School District, neighboring Grants Pass.

*I've been a teacher for 15 years, the last nine at Hidden Valley High School. Two years ago, our assistant principal asked me to be a math coach, hoping we could bring up our math grades.*

*We reduced the number of standards by combining them, or bridging them, and using more complex problems. By unwrapping and re-ordering the sequence of some standards, teaching's become more effective. Certain aligned things can now be taught in less than a week which used to take two weeks because they were taught at different times in the semester rather than back to back.*

*Since employing the proficiency model, I'm learning much more about my students, as individuals, than I knew before. I've done more one-on-one this year with students than in my prior 15 years. Homework takes a back seat...it's practice, more or less, and students only need four or five problems to understand the concept. After that, it just becomes busy work. We still use a textbook and assign homework, but those aren't the primary focus anymore.*

*Because we've seen such improvement in math scores using this model, we're getting buy-in from other teachers. While, in general, younger teachers take to proficiency more enthusiastically, we have a math teacher with 25 years here who has put in extra time and is doing a great job with proficiency in his classes.*

*I've been given half-time for coaching duties and teach only three classes. We got some grant money to have more interactive capability in the district. Using an Active Board, I create digital lesson plans that I share with other teachers in the building and the district. Through the school's website, and using Google Apps site, we're sharing assessments, lessons, worksheets and links to other resources. Others contribute to my lesson plan and, when we're done, it's a stronger lesson. We've never had such a strong [teaching] unit as we have now.*

*I don't see this as taking more time to deliver the proficiency-based model...it's a reallocation of time. I don't spend much time evaluating homework and I spend less time with behavior issues in class. The relationship between parent and teacher is easier and more direct. And students take more ownership of their learning. Even kids with tough home lives thrive here because they are responsible, and do what they need to do to succeed.*

**ALI (ALLISON) MARKS**, Forest Grove High School. She is a BEC coach for language arts and has shared her proficiency model with middle and high school teachers throughout the state of Oregon.

*After attending a training facilitated by the BEC, I was inspired to look closely at my classroom activities and assessments to determine whether they were truly aligned to the Oregon standards for language arts. I looked for ways to reduce the fluff-like journaling - and emphasize essential skills and meaningful strategies.*

*For example, to demonstrate proficiency, students are asked to summarize what they've read and perhaps predict what may next happen in a story. Mastery is gained at a deeper level, however, with students able to analyze or synthesize a text.*

After piloting grading by proficiency in my own classroom for a semester and modifying it based on the experience, I began the second semester encouraging other people in my building to look at the proficiency model and partnered with fellow language arts teachers and a science teacher to grade by proficiency. In the fall of 2009, Forest Grove High School mandated that all courses be assessed using the proficiency model.

I was under more stress as a teacher before we began proficiency-based teaching and learning, because I wasn't convinced my students were gaining the skills necessary for them to be successful in the college and career worlds. When I began grading by proficiency, there was more work on the front end, but I feel I have an ethical responsibility to reflect on what I am doing in my classroom and improve my practices in order to provide a superior education to students. The addition to my workload was meaningful and, therefore, well worth the effort.

Proficiency-based grading is much more transparent to me and to students than traditional grading methods. As a result of my collaboration with students, we have embraced a culture of learning within my classroom. Parents tell me that their kids are 'challenged' by my classes, but school SHOULD be a challenge. Students tell me that they see the value in their learning and there's no mystery in the grades they receive. My conversations with students have changed from: 'What do I need to do to get an A?' to 'How do I show you what I can do?'

Finally, with formative assessments being given a half-dozen times or more each class period, the state [summative] assessments present fewer problems for my students, so their state assessment results have increased. With proficiency in place, my failure rate has dropped from upwards of 30 percent of students in some mainstream classes to just a handful of students this year. At the same time, academic rigor has increased, which feels like a victory because students are experiencing success with high-level, challenging content.

**DAVE FOWLER** teaches Technical Education at Heppner Junior/Senior High School in Morrow County.

I began teaching in Heppner in 1989. Two years ago, the school moved to a proficiency-based system and, in the first year, it took extra time to change the instruction and to develop new assessments. But it was a good exercise because we had to take a harder look at what are the 'must have's' in the curriculum, versus the 'nice to know' stuff.

The proficiency model is a boon to those kids who want to learn; it's harder for those who want to skate through. One student, who used to get A's because of extra credit now has to work harder to get A's.

Like most other schools implementing proficiency, we've set aside time every day for 'intervention,' a time students can re-take tests – maybe in a different format - and get the extra support they need to reach proficiency. Sometimes the best support comes from peer-to-peer collaboration. There's flexibility in the assessments; I'm just looking for them to show me what they know. And, where the final product used to account for a large part of the grade, now it's more about the process, demonstrating proficiency in the skill levels leading to the final product. So, I'm more a

facilitator than a teacher. I've found that students are learning better, not necessarily more.

## PROFICIENCY - NEXT STEPS

BEC is currently working with four Oregon school districts to implement and strengthen proficiency-based practices: Albany, Medford, Morrow County and Three Rivers. Based on the rapidly increased demand for training, BEC is stepping up its resources to meet that need.

Ongoing support for BEC's work has come from many places, says Busch-Johnsen, including the James F. & Marion L. Miller Foundation, the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, Intel Corpora-

**THIS PROFICIENCY INITIATIVE IS CAPTURING THE IMAGINATION AND ENTHUSIASM OF EDUCATORS ACROSS THE STATE. BEC HAS FOSTERED A UNIQUE PARTNERSHIP WITH THE ODE... AS A RESULT OF THEIR WORK, THIS INITIATIVE IS POISED TO MAKE A REAL DIFFERENCE IN OREGON TEACHING AND LEARNING."**

— Susan Castillo,

Oregon State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

tion and others. The BEC also has strong partnerships with the Oregon Department of Education and several Oregon public and private universities.

Starting with the graduating class of 2012, all Oregon students will have new high school diploma requirements: to demonstrate proficiency in four essential skill standards: reading, writing, applied math, and oral presentation. Policy makers are still working on the question of how to require similar demonstration of proficiency in content standards. □



Technical Education teacher Dave Fowler

### Credit:

Provided by Dave Fowler