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Where and How Can We Enact "Little Justices" within Classroom Assessment?

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Where and How Can We Enact "Little Justices" within Classroom Assessment?

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Where and How Can We Enact “Little Justices” within Classroom Assessment?

By Jill Willis (Queensland University of Technology, Australia)
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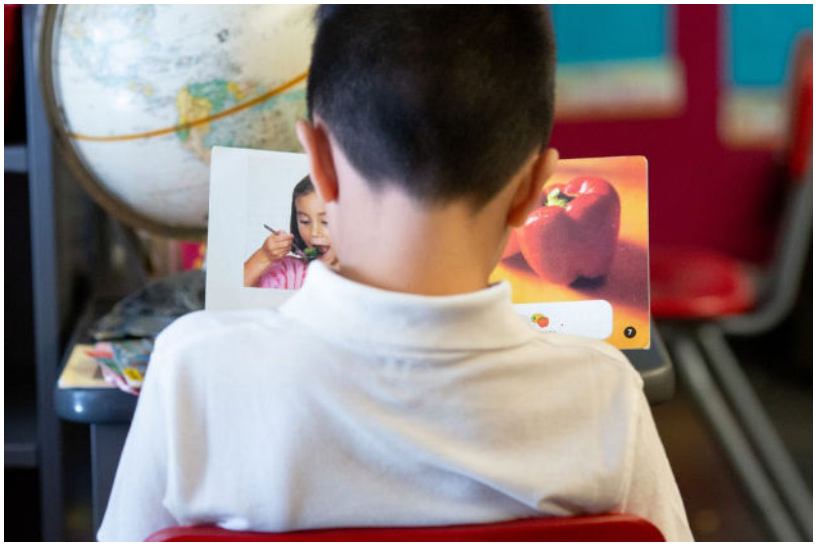
A teacher stands behind a student to check their work and offer feedback. This is a common sight in classrooms, as feedback is known to have high potential for learning. What the teacher doesn’t know is that *where* they have positioned themselves is causing the student distress. The student can’t see the teacher’s face but everyone else can.



It’s kind of nerve wracking. Cause she’s looking at your shoulder, and you’re going ‘Oh, no, she’s reading this. Oh no, it’s wrong. It’s wrong. I’m way off. Oh, no, oh no.’ (Cowie, 2005, p. 205).

Have you ever felt something like this when someone was behind you, watching what you were doing? What about when that person realized the impact their position was having and they moved to sit beside you? Relief is immediate. When a teacher chooses to sit alongside a student for a shared feedback conversation, they are taking action that demonstrates empathy. The teacher’s position alongside the student also opens up the opportunity for dialogue, and for the resulting feedback to be more meaningful.

Awareness of these subtle but powerful messages that bodies, spaces and resources communicate to students can help teachers create small, ethical interventions in everyday social and spatial patterns of classroom assessment-“little justices”. Everyday classroom assessment can help students understand that they are powerful knowers who can be curious, connected and make contributions in the world. We were attracted by the idea of “little justices” as a way of thinking about how everyday actions by teachers might undermine or enrich teacher classroom

assessment and student learning. Small changes to traditional patterns are within the scope of all of us when we engage with learners.

> Little justices "can be as small as a movement, a word, an image, or an idea that brings care and attention" to what matters.
> (Rousell, 2020, p. 1392).

Classroom assessment practices like sharing learning intentions and success criteria, self- and peer assessment, questioning and feedback practices are well established ways for students and teachers to engage in the evaluative processes essential for progressing learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). These sets of practices known in some contexts as Assessment for Learning (AfL), and in others as Formative Assessment, are opportunities for generating, noticing, recognizing and responding to evidence, including offering feedback, to move learning forward.

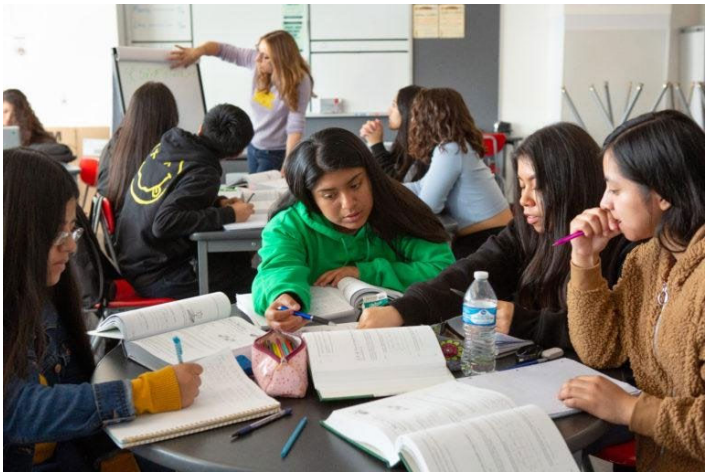
To understand more about what helps students get the most out of AfL learning opportunities, we revisited 16 of our research papers that focused on student experiences in a retrospective review to pay closer attention to the accounts of AfL (Willis & Cowie, 2025). *Where* (physical spaces), *how* (with what materials) and *who* (with which people) AfL occurs influences the evaluative judgements students make about whether they are on track, or how they participate. For young people such everyday choices in daily classroom life are what they remember and value.

1. *Where* in our classroom space supports AfL enactments of "little justices"?

As indicated in the opening story, it matters where teachers, students and resources are positioned within the classroom physical spaces. Across our classroom studies, confident students and students who were particularly interested in the topic, or felt affinity with the teacher, positioned themselves close to the teacher. Proximity to the teacher often meant they experienced higher levels of attention and feedback and more opportunistic interactions where they could ask about what they did not understand with more privacy. Students valued teachers moving around the classroom to "check on" them as this movement signaled the teacher was interested in them and their learning and helped them feel safe to make eye-contact, quiet queries and seek feedback. Students also chose to sit in places that limited direct teacher access such as in the middle of a row of desks if they wished to limit the teacher asking questions if they did not feel ready for such close teacher attention.

The classroom physical space influenced how students created self and peer assessment opportunities. For some students, being part of a regular table group was a way of informally checking to see the quality of their own work in progress in comparison to their peers. We also observed students choosing to move around the classroom to seek assistance and feedback from

peers. Students who had received implied or explicit permission to move were proactive in self-assessment and sought more peer feedback via the circulation of ideas and practices.



When teachers notice who chooses which physical spaces and how students make evaluative judgements, teachers can then deliberately invite more, and more equitable, student participation in AfL.

2. *What* in our classroom space supports AfL enactments of "little justices"?

The *what* in classroom space recognizes that students and teachers think with and through materials. Material representations of success criteria on posters, digital class notes, scaffolding worksheets or in expert examples provided students with ways to self-assess and adapt.

In one observation, we noted that Roger (5 years old) evaluated the kite he made by comparing it with a commercial toy kite to realize his tails were too wide and the kite flew once he remedied this. Jane's Year 1 (5 year old) students engaged in vigorous debate about solids, liquids and gases when she asked her students to decide which category was best for the egg in their list of ingredients for the biscuits they were going to make. Sorting physical examples is a way of encouraging dialogue, sharing evidence of thinking, and can remove the need to scribe or describe in writing, an inclusive little act of justice.

When students' work was projected onto a class screen, students could see how their work compared with the work of others, whether the teacher deliberately invited such comparisons, or not. However, material and virtual resources need to be of a sufficient size for all students to view and manipulate, otherwise they led to little injustices because students are limited in how they can contribute to the meaning making. A persistent record with which to self-assess and self-manage learning that can be accessed when students need it was an essential little justice practice for AfL especially for those students with attention or language difficulties. Students said, "it just helps you know where you're at and you can see your own improvement" and "since it's online it's always there, it's always accessible, so you can go to it anytime you want" (Willis et al. 2019, p. 243).

3. *Who* in our classroom space supports AfL enactments of "little justices"?

Authentic audiences beyond the school such as family members, community groups or citizen scientists help students feel like their choices and actions contribute to the curriculum and to the learning of others. An 8 -year-old student created a presentation for their family to extend their learning; “I talked to my family about it and my family were surprised that I knew so much stuff … I made a slide-show … my family said it was really good.” (Chen & Cowie, 2013, p. 2169).

Formative processes like surveying community members, or sharing works-in-progress with others in the school community, also contributed to a collective learning culture of affirmation and constructive feedback. Assessment is an ongoing process of evaluating and identity formation, and involving other trusted audiences is a way of communicating to students that they matter.

So what and now what?

Ideas about how classroom assessment can inform teachers and students have been around for over 25 years. Minor changes to *where*, *what* and *who* are involved in the assessment for learning routines can be powerful acts of little justices. Such acts can invite students who may have thought success was “not for me” to realize their learner agency and identities as people who are included in broader stories of aspirational learning and knowing. Importantly, when students had restricted say in AfL interactions, or when student intentions were misunderstood by teachers, such as students being chastised for helping peers, such micro-moves add up over time to create a sense of injustice, potentially communicating to students that they have little power.

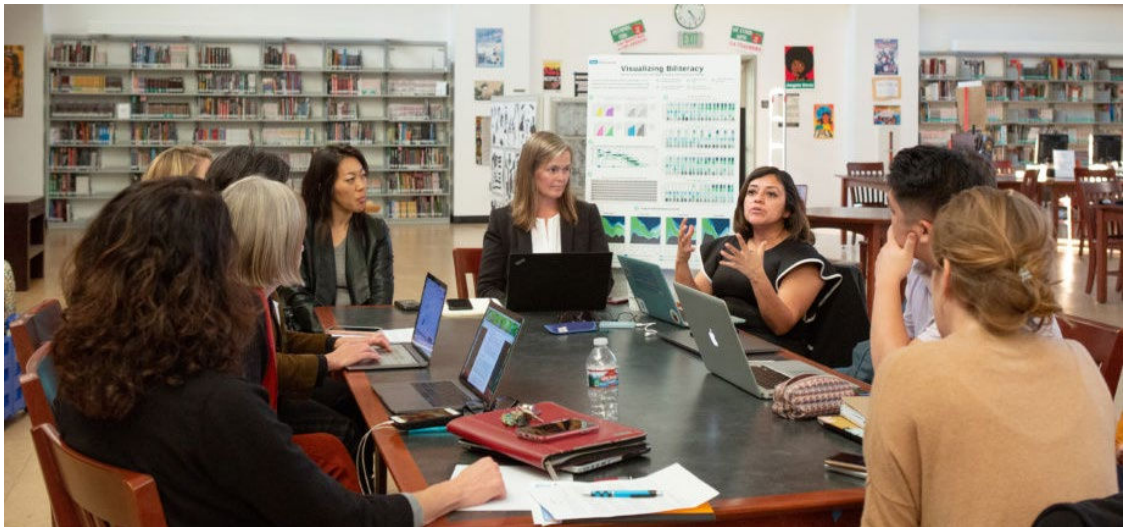
“Little justices” are important when equity is a concept that is becoming more politically fraught in some policy contexts. Teachers who currently are doing many of these actions, can continue to do so with new deliberation, realizing the implications and potential for student learning, agency and well-being. Importantly, discussions with colleagues can provide additional perspectives for noticing ways to make use of the spaces, materials and people in AfL interactions

Conversations with colleagues as a resource for professional learning

We have found Mason's (2002) ideas about paying explicit attention to what we each notice within the flux of classroom interaction useful for opening up new ideas for new acts that could be “little justices”.

- First we give an account **of** an event by describing to each other what happened in detail.
- Only then do we consider *multiple* accounts for **why** something might have happened.
- The listener asks questions to help prompt new ideas.

This shared dialogue is a productive way of sharing classroom experience with the aim of deepening our understanding and enhancing our practice. Consider sharing classroom assessment examples that highlight "little justices" in your practice or that could be opportunities to increase "little justices."



Questions you might like to ask yourself, or discuss with peers, administrators or instructional coaches include:

- *How do choices about where to sit and move communicate to students that they are trusted and expected to take more agency in AfL interactions?*
- *What resources support students for rapid collaborative revision and peer feedback?*
- *Where do you stand to collect evidence, and what implicit messages does that communicate about who can be knowledgeable?*
- *Who might find the opportunities for more movement and peer assessment challenging and what can be done to make the options more readily accessible?*

Such questions bring the emotions, physical settings and physical bodies of students and teachers into the foreground of AfL interactions. AfL micro-interactions need to be attempted ethically, and with empathy if they are to achieve the goal of being enactments of "little justices". Affective environments of safety, kindness, curiosity and comfort help students and teachers become attuned to one another and experience an identity of belonging.

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Further Reading

https://www.michiganassessmentconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2018_May_Conditions_Necessary_for_Implementation_0.pdf

https://www.michiganassessmentconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2019_April_What-is-Learner-Agency.pdf