

MASTERY LEARNING

Mastery learning is an instructional strategy that results in comprehensive grasp of curriculum as demonstrated through performance-based evaluations. Teachers support student mastery of material by providing guidance and assistance. The student builds upon each success and then moves on to another level of understanding. Norbert Baharally explains that “Mastery learning has increased communication between teachers and students, and teachers and parents. This partnership has created a sense of student accountability for their learning resulting in increased engagement and understanding of learning. Mastery learning should lead to better retention of knowledge learned – it is not simply rote memory and regurgitation.”

Teachers use strategies to encourage students to integrate concepts and issues as well as understandings and skills across the curriculum. With this holistic learning, students take fragments of information and create personal meaning. Norbert Baharally explains that

“A focus on mastery learning has changed the conversations amongst our staff – they are considering questions that, in the traditional education system, would not be tackled. There are ongoing conversations occurring because teachers are not existing as standalone units, but are working together and collaborating.”

“Students and teachers require time to reteach, relearn and reassess. This must be addressed. Opportunities for quality time for students and for teachers to work independently or collaboratively, and for teachers and students to work together must be made available.”

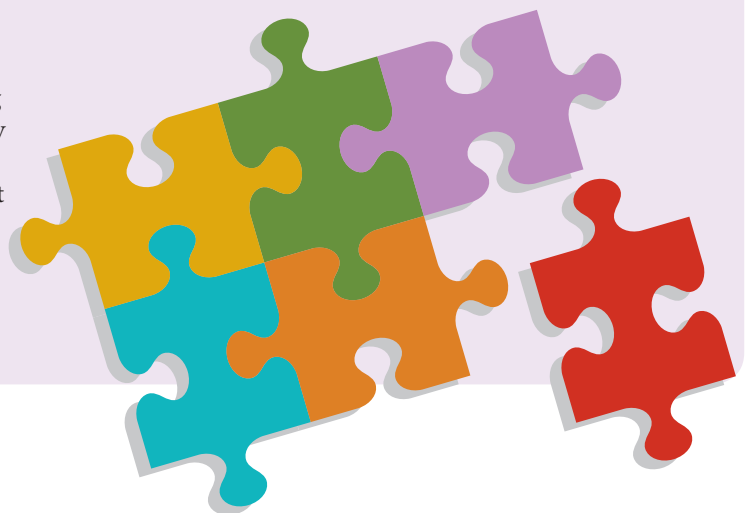
Wanda Gerard, Principal, Peace Wapiti Academy, with Josina Nagtegaal, Flex Coordinator, and Debbie Terceros, CONNECT Coordinator

What is the impact on students?

Students receive feedback not only about what they know well but also about what they need to revisit in order to demonstrate mastery. Chuck Jenkins explains the approach and impact in this way, “If you or I failed our driver’s test, we wouldn’t focus on the things we did right. We’d ask, ‘What are the pieces that I need to fix up before I take the test again?’ Teachers should ask themselves, ‘What are the missing pieces for success for each individual student? Are there alternative ways to show mastery other than pen-to-paper, retaking an exam?’”

The impact of assessment paired with effective activities that address students’ areas of need more for deeper understanding is motivating to students because the goal is successful mastery of the subject material. Wanda Gerard says, “The concepts of time and space have become fluid and dynamic in every aspect of running a classroom. It has become a place where students write a quiz or exam when they feel they have satisfactorily learned the material ... and work ahead if they feel they have mastered certain topics.”

Chuck Jenkins also talks about how incorporating mastery learning into the instructional process does not have to be confined to the classroom. He says that, “his school has changed the focus to learning outcomes instead of grades, but diploma marks are staying equal to what they were – and our kids are reporting a better high school experience. It really shows that time in a classroom doesn’t equate to better or worse learning.”



What is the impact on staff?

Teachers become active collaborators with students when they work with the students to discover the appropriate activities that will help them master the curriculum. Tom Christensen says, “We have done a lot of work with how to do project design in class and project tuning between colleagues. Essentially, the belief is that one way to ensure mastery learning in any subject is to have the students develop the driving question they are going to try and resolve. Completion or mastery is set by how well they have explored the driving question that they themselves established. We have one part of our school which really emphasizes project learning as a main form of delivery.”

He goes on to say that “A project is more than an assignment; it has to move the curriculum forward. It’s more reflective of what students will do when they move onto a job. Even in a manufacturing job, you’re not just doing what your boss says; you’re problem solving and moving things forward. With our diploma exams, the general belief is that it is a race against time to get through the curriculum so that students are ready to write them. Hence there needs to be more teacher-directed instruction. I have some staff who have begun to try and do some project-based learning for their diploma courses thus becoming less teacher-directed.” He adds that, “Particularly for Grade 12 teachers, who are trying to prepare their students for diploma exams, it’s been a real leap of faith. But they’ve begun to realize that they can let go of some of the controls and it will be just fine.”

With the mastery learning approach, all students can demonstrate excellence in their approach to learning. Teachers find that some students excel beyond the reach of the curriculum while other students are beginning to master the material. The impact on staff is extremely rewarding as the simple process of learning for mastery promotes differentiated learning in a timely and efficient manner.

Wanda Gerard recalls how one teacher commented, “Now we can concentrate on making sure that students have mastered the outcomes. If they master them quickly, the students can move on; if they master them slowly, we [offer] extension and reteach strategies that enable them to have the time they need.”

When mastery learning is a focus in a school:

- self-directed learning is valued
- continuous (credit-recovery) learning opportunities are available
- learning is systematic and sequential, as students gain mastery of the subject material
- formative assessment is used to provide ongoing feedback
- time is no longer a barrier to mastery learning
- feedback is used to move student learning forward.

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Tom Christensen, Principal, Olds