The Leaders of Their Own Learning Companion

NEW TOOLS AND TIPS FOR TACKLING THE COMMON CHALLENGES OF STUDENT-ENGAGED ASSESSMENT
Praise for The Leaders of Their Own Learning Companion

“In a world of accelerating novelty and complexity, helping young people develop agency—the ability to manage their attention and their learning—may be the most important gift we can give them. The Leaders of their Own Learning Companion is full of tips and tools that equip teacher teams to help students gain a clear sense of what they do well, what they need to work on, and how to improve.

—Tom Vander Ark, CEO of Getting Smart; former executive director of education, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

“As a follow-up to their excellent book, Leaders of Their Own Learning, EL Education offers eminently practical advice to help teachers define clear and assessable learning targets, provide learners with on-going, descriptive feedback, offer models of excellence to inspire craftsmanship, and engage students in reflective self-assessment and personalized goal setting. I recommend this book as a ‘must read’ for all educators!”

—Jay McTighe, educational author and consultant, coauthor of the Understanding by Design* series

“The Leaders of Their Own Learning Companion is a practical and useful guide for educators and educational leaders who seek to make a difference where it matters most: improving the learning outcomes of students. Written in an accessible style with lots of useful examples, this book is an insightful and invaluable resource.”

—Pedro A. Noguera, PhD, distinguished professor of education, faculty director, Center for the Transformation of Schools, UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies

“Once again, another book from EL Education that reminds us what engagement and student ownership of learning can really mean.”

—Larry Rosenstock, founder and CEO, High Tech High

“A new vision for 21st century education requires a new posture for students: to be in the lead. This message was so powerfully captured by the groundbreaking book: Leaders of Their Own Learning. This vision also requires a new role for teachers as the guides of self-directed learning. There has been a tremendous void in the literature on this point, until now. The companion to The Leaders of Their Own Learning Companion will become the teacher’s holy grail for the student-led classroom.”


“EL Education made a huge impact on teachers and students across the country with Leaders of Their Own Learning. The sequel, The Leaders of Their Own Learning Companion, builds on this success with concrete and simple—yet powerful—strategies teachers can use to make high quality student-engaged assessment come alive in their classrooms. Ron Berger’s work has been inspiring me since he was an award-winning project-based learning classroom teacher—with The Leaders of Their Own Learning Companion, Berger and his colleagues at EL Education will inspire and support hundreds of thousands more educators.”

—Bob Lenz, CEO, PBL Works, Buck Institute for Education
“A playbook for student-centered teaching and learning! The Leaders of Their Own Learning Companion is a seminal guide for school leaders and teachers eager to overcome the challenges of implementing student-engaged assessment. This book provides practical strategies and tips on how to deepen learning targets, engage students in reflection and improve the quality of student work. With inspiring stories, quick-wins and lesson for leaders, this book will shortly become your dog-eared guide for changing your practice and transforming your school.”
—Laura McBain, K12 Lab Director of Community & Implementation, Hasso Plattner Institute of Design, Stanford University

"Learning cannot be done to us. We must empower our children to be able to lead their own lives successfully. Leaders of Their Own Learning and this new Companion provide a much-needed foundation that enables and empowers learners to step inside their learning and take the lead."
—Paul Taylor, principal, Banora Point Primary School, Banora Point, New South Wales, Australia
THE LEADERS OF THEIR OWN LEARNING COMPANION
THE LEADERS OF THEIR OWN LEARNING COMPANION

New Tools and Tips for Tackling the Common Challenges of Student-Engaged Assessment

Ron Berger
Anne Vilen
Libby Woodfin

Jossey-Bass™
A Wiley Brand
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  I’ve asked them to do, but they aren’t always learning what they need to learn
  Challenge #2: I’m in a rut with my learning targets. I need help varying
  them more and making them more interesting for my students
Learning Target 2: I can use learning targets throughout a lesson to
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  Challenge #3: I feel okay about writing learning targets, but I’m in a
  rut about how to use them. I always introduce them and unpack them
  in the same way
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  Challenge #5: I have a high percentage of English language learners in
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  focused on their learning because of language barriers
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  throughout the course of a lesson?
  Challenge #7: I post my learning targets on the board or on chart paper,
  but as soon as students leave the room or move on to the next
  learning target, they forget what work relates to what learning target
Challenge #8: I know that learning targets for character are a good idea, but I don't take them as seriously as academic learning targets, and therefore, I don't take the time to really focus on them with my students

Learning Target 3: I can create sets of learning targets that ensure my students are aiming for grade-level standards

Challenge #9: I'm struggling to translate standards into learning targets. I have so many standards to cover. Should there be a learning target for every standard? Is it a one-to-one relationship?

Challenge #10: I'm pretty good at writing learning targets, but I struggle to choose or craft assessments that clearly demonstrate that my students have met a target (and are therefore on their way to meeting required standards)

Lessons for Leaders: Chapter 1

Post-Assessment: Track Your Progress: Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Checking for Understanding during Daily Lessons

Pre-Assessment: Track Your Progress: Chapter 2

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Challenge #1: I haven't developed enough of a positive culture in my classroom and, as a result, my students are afraid to accurately assess their understanding in front of other students

Challenge #2: My students don't view learning as a collaborative effort. They don't want to share their work or talk with other students about what they know

Learning Target 2: I can use checking-for-understanding techniques that help students assess their progress toward learning targets and allow me to monitor their progress

Challenge #3: I'm having a hard time finding checking-for-understanding techniques that give me the information I need (and I don't want to spend a lot of time teaching new techniques to my students)

Challenge #4: I'm never sure when to use which technique during the course of a lesson. I want to be judicious and efficient and not wear my students out checking for understanding too frequently

Challenge #5: I struggle to efficiently track student progress while I'm observing them at work or engaged in discussions

Learning Target 3: I can use questions effectively to check for understanding

Challenge #6: I ask lots of questions, but they don't elicit rich or engaging classroom discourse

Challenge #7: It's one thing to check for understanding on low-level questions, but I need new strategies for asking questions with a higher cognitive demand so that I can check for a deeper level of understanding
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Challenge #8: I always run out of time for the debrief at the end of my lessons. I struggle to prioritize it even though I know it's important

Challenge #9: When debriefing a lesson, I'll have students turn and talk or reflect with a peer, but I'm not capturing what they've learned

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Chapter 3

Using Data with Students

Pre-Assessment: Track Your Progress: Chapter 3

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Challenge #1: My students and their families have a rigid idea of what data is. How do I help them see the bigger picture?

Challenge #2: My students don't get excited about academic data. They don't see it as useful or meaningful

Challenge #3: Looking at the data feels like another thing to do. How do I make time?

Learning Target 2: I can teach students to use data to evaluate their progress in relation to a learning target

Challenge #4: With so many students, it's impossible for me to keep track of each student's data on a daily basis. How can I enlist students in organizing, tracking, and storing their own data effectively?

Challenge #5: My students don't see illuminating trends that can motivate them to persist in their learning. How do I get them to analyze data more effectively?

Learning Target 3: I can support students to set meaningful and effective goals

Challenge #6: My students learn “in the moment.” How do I help them see the big picture and use today’s learning to set goals for tomorrow?

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Chapter 4

Models, Critique, and Descriptive Feedback

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EL Education is redefining student achievement in diverse communities across the country, ensuring that all students master rigorous content, develop positive character, and produce high-quality work. By creating great public schools where they are needed most, EL Education inspires teachers and students to achieve more than they thought possible.

EL Education’s portfolio of instructional materials and coaching services draws on decades of deep partnership with schools and districts in its national school network (those implementing its school model) and in its family of literacy partners (those implementing its Language Arts curriculum).

Based on its founding principles of meaningful work, character, and respect for teachers, EL Education’s offerings transform teaching and learning to promote habits of scholarship and character that lead to high student achievement. In addition to success on standardized tests, EL Education students demonstrate critical thinking, intellectual courage, and emotional resilience; they possess the passion and the capacity to contribute to a better world.

EL Education’s professional books, including Leaders of Their Own Learning, have reached over 100,000 teachers and school leaders and impacted millions of students across the country and internationally. The books’ accompanying videos, available for free at ELeducation.org/resources/collections, have been viewed millions of times.

EL Education, a 501c(3) nonprofit, was founded in 1992 by Outward Bound USA in collaboration with the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

For more information, visit ELeducation.org.
Writing a book like this is deeply collaborative work. This book in particular was born out of conversation with school coaches, leaders, and teachers in schools around the country who were using our first book, *Leaders of Their Own Learning*. We are abundantly grateful for their ideas, suggestions, and feedback. Their contributions of real-world documents, tools, and examples are the backbone of this book. In the service of students in classrooms across the nation, we are honored to acknowledge the many talented and generous educators who made this book possible.

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- Codman Academy in Boston, Massachusetts
- Conservatory Lab Charter School in Boston, Massachusetts
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Delaware Ridge Elementary School in Kansas City, Kansas
Florence City Schools in Alabama
Evergreen Community Charter School in Asheville, North Carolina
Fox Creek Elementary School in Littleton, Colorado
Genesee Community Charter School in Rochester, New York
Gilbert High School in Gilbert, South Carolina
Harborside Academy in Kenosha, Wisconsin
Harvard Graduate School of Education in Cambridge, Massachusetts
High Tech High in San Diego, California
Interdistrict School for Arts and Communication (ISAAC) in New London, Connecticut
Irving A. Robbins Middle School in Farmington, Connecticut
King Middle School in Portland, Maine
Kuumba Academy Charter School in Wilmington, Delaware
Metropolitan Expeditionary Learning School in New York City
Oakhurst Elementary School in Decatur, Georgia
Open World Learning Community in St. Paul, Minnesota
Pike Road Elementary School in Pike Road, Alabama
Polaris Charter Academy in Chicago, Illinois
Pottenger Elementary School in Springfield, Massachusetts
Presumpscot Elementary School in Portland, Maine
River Bluff High School in Lexington, South Carolina
Tahoe Expedition Academy in Truckee, California
Tapestry Charter School in Buffalo, New York
The Franklin School of Innovation in Asheville, North Carolina
The Noah Wallace School in Farmington, Connecticut
The Odyssey School of Denver in Denver, Colorado
Shutesbury Elementary School in Shutesbury, Massachusetts
The Springfield Renaissance School in Springfield, Massachusetts
World of Inquiry School #58 in Rochester, New York
Thomaston Grammar School in Thomaston, Maine
University Park Campus School in Worcester, Massachusetts
Two Rivers Public Charter School in Washington, DC
Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School in New York City
Walk into any school in Alabama and chances are you’ll find evidence of student-engaged assessment in action. And, if you look closely, you’ll find copies of Leaders of Their Own Learning in nearly every classroom.

For almost five years, the Alabama Best Practices Center has used Leaders of Their Own Learning (LOTOL) as one of our primary guiding texts in our statewide learning networks. The clear and compelling writing – rich with examples and scenarios – and the featured videos bring student-engaged assessment to life for teachers and leaders. Read on and you will understand our excitement about the arrival of another powerful professional learning tool, The Leaders of Their Own Learning Companion.

Making Students Leaders of Their Own Learning

Perhaps the most best way to understand the impact of LOTOL-inspired, student-engaged assessment is to see and hear students in action at some of our participating schools. For example, visit Weeden Elementary in Florence, Alabama, a high-poverty school where more than a third of students are English language learners, and students will show you their data notebooks. They’ll explain where they stand on a particular learning target. And, you’ll hear the pride in their voices as they note their progress.

Or, perhaps in the spring, head to rural Isabella High, a K–12 school in Chilton County – home to most of Alabama’s peach production – and you’ll enjoy a picnic in the school’s sloping backyard, where students are sharing their academic progress with their parents through student-led conferences. “From the moment we began the book study of Leaders of Their Own Learning, I fell in love,” Principal Sue Ellen Gilliland told me recently. “We are using these strategies with all students, including students with special needs, and I have personally witnessed their power in unleashing student ownership of their education.”

Or, go to Pike Road Elementary School near Alabama’s state capital, where regularly you see celebrations of learning with students showcasing artifacts of their learning. During my last visit, two students showed videos of their project to demonstrate motion and friction. And another fourth-grader proudly shared his “menu math” project, noting that he was learning fifth- and sixth-grade standards. You can view the videos of the projects here: https://bit.ly/2WCn75s.

There are many other examples of schools – Rock Quarry Elementary in Tuscaloosa and all of Oxford City Schools, as well as schools in Athens, Alabama – in which you can see student-engaged assessment in action. Alabama students are more engaged and learning more because of the commitment to making students leaders of their own learning.
Teaching and Learning in Alabama Is Transforming

In addition to the examples from schools just cited, there are a few key practices from Leaders of Their Own Learning that are worth highlighting for their transformative impact on schools throughout Alabama.

Going Deeper with Learning Targets

Since the introduction of Alabama’s college-and-career standards, we’ve focused the professional learning we provide for our networks of schools and leaders on key aspects of standards-based instruction. After unwrapping the standard, teachers create learning targets. For many, that’s where the challenges begin. In the early stages of this collaboration, some teachers felt that creating learning targets was just one more thing to do. Others would tell us they were already using learning targets (often laminated and ordered from a website). It became clear that we needed to step back and spend more time building teachers’ knowledge and skills about the effective use of learning targets in everyday classroom instruction.

With Leaders of Their Own Learning, teachers can see, firsthand, what the use of student-friendly learning targets “looks like.” The online videos and the suggestions in the book help teachers understand how to bring a learning target to life by dialoguing with their students to ensure that they understand the embedded words, concepts, and skills. This gives teachers the confidence to shift from simply posting the words on the wall to making the target the cornerstone for each day’s learning, enabling both students and teachers to understand and monitor their progress.

By reading and watching the videos that accompany LOTOL, educators in our networks – teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators – have discovered how to use learning targets as a driver for student motivation and academic progress.

Engaging Students with More Frequent Checks for Understanding

Checking for understanding, the second component of student-engaged assessment, also becomes clearer to teachers as they deepen their understanding of target-driven learning. LOTOL’s video examples help teachers consider the rich variety of checks for understanding we can tap into, as well as how to use the checks to adjust instruction.

At our network sessions, teachers have at times made the connection to video games, where students receive instant feedback and adjust their strategies accordingly. It only makes sense, they said, to use the same strategies in the classroom.

Inspiring Quality Work with Models and Critiques

Another key aspect of student-engaged assessment that promotes excellence is the use of models, critiques, and descriptive feedback. LOTOL has helped teachers gain a deeper understanding of the importance of exposing students to exemplary student work. Teachers love the ability to tap into EL Education’s online curated supply of outstanding student work for all grade levels and all subjects (modelsofexcellence.eleducation.org). They know that when students examine and critique great work, they can understand what it means to become better writers, mathematicians, scientists, and historians.