

Learning Progressions – Greg Ashman

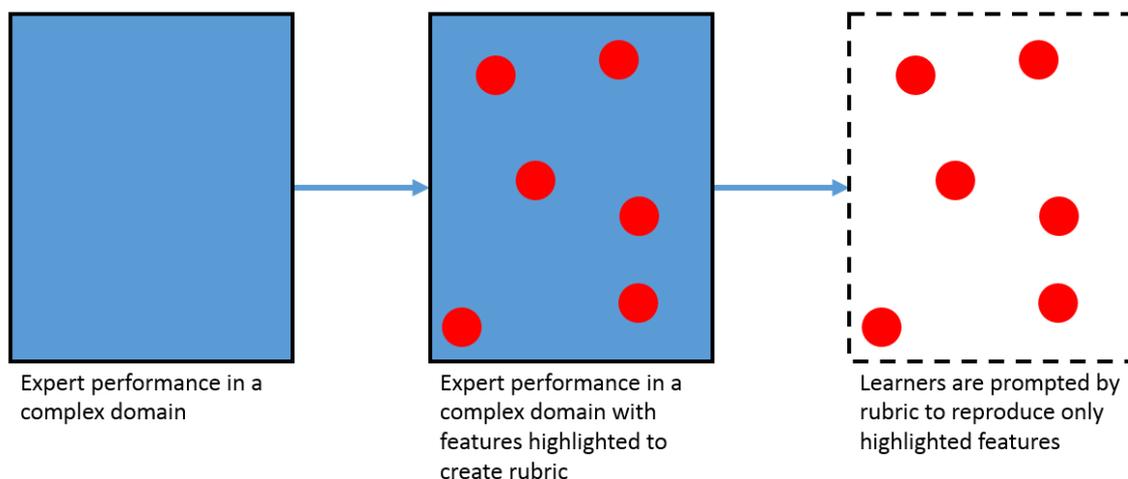
The idea of creating learning progressions is not new. A system of reporting student progress using graduated levels was abandoned in England seven years ago (Roberts, 2016). Learning progressions make intuitive sense – why not map the pathway a student will take towards expertise in a particular area? So, why do education systems struggle to make levels work? There are three main problems.

Firstly, how do we know that the progression we have mapped-out is the *actual* progression students make in learning? Students are highly unlikely to make linear progress in the way we may imagine. Research into learning and memory suggests that there is no simple and gradual accumulation of knowledge in the mind (see e.g. Bjork & Bjork, 1992). Even if we derive such a progression empirically from real students at different stages in their learning, we cannot be sure that such a progression will apply to *all* such students and we may unintentionally limit some students by not exposing them to concepts they are capable of learning.

Secondly, such progressions are often decontextualised. For instance, in the ACARA National Literacy Learning Progression that has been adapted for New South Wales (ACARA, 2018), under ‘persuasive text indicators’ in level CrT10, one statement is, “...includes persuasive points with effective elaborations and supporting evidence.” This statement is abstract and it is possible to imagine applying it to both a primary school student’s paragraph on school uniform and an undergraduate essay on the Bosnian war. This therefore incentivises teachers to select the simplest possible contexts in which students can then demonstrate this dot-point, driving instruction away from the rich contexts needed for achieving the aim of improving critical thinking.

Finally, complex performances, such as writing an essay, are multi-faceted. When writing a learning progression or rubric, we therefore tend to select from representative features of a particular level of performance (Sadler, 2009). This is fine provided that the assessment is done at arms-length and teachers and students do not know what these features are. Otherwise, we risk simply teaching students the features:

How rubrics fail



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Rather than looking for disconfirming evidence that points to gaps in what students know and can do so that we may intervene, we look for confirming evidence that fits our progression and so fool ourselves into thinking students have reached a level of expertise they have not reached.

References

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