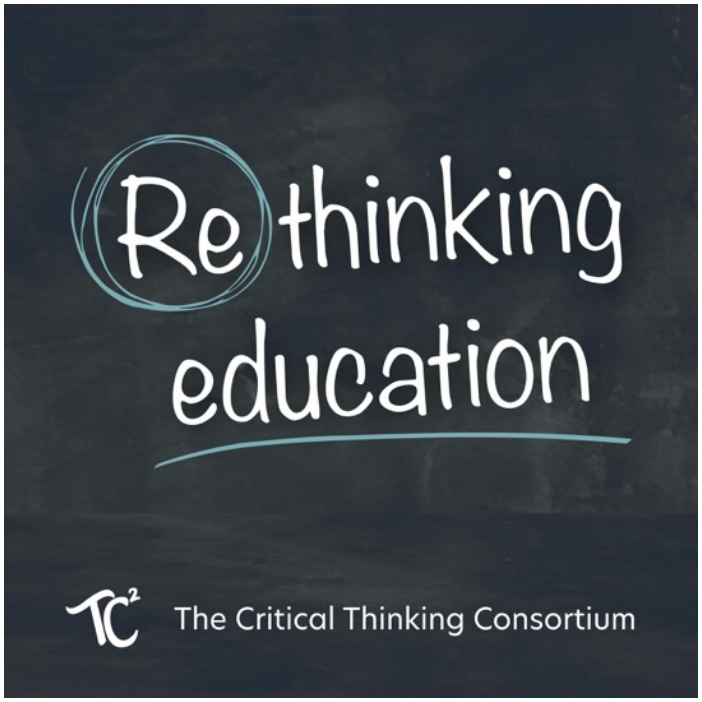

Transcript

Episode 1: Can assessment actually be a source of inspiration?

Your partner in critical, creative, and collaborative thinking

Podcast Episode 1: Can assessment actually be a source of inspiration?

Warren
Welcome to Re: thinking education, a podcast from The Critical Thinking Consortium.

Warren
Welcome friends to the first episode of The Critical Thinking Consortium's new podcast, *Re: thinking education*. We're really pleased to be embarking on this new venture with you and invite you as listeners and educators and partners as we explore really relevant and important topics in education.

To begin our first episode, I invite you to think about your experience in education and your feelings when you hear the word *assessment*. I know when I hear the word assessment, I think about my life as a student growing up in Alberta and especially government exams at the end of grade 12, and how scared and nervous I felt about those assessments. Reflecting on my life as an educator, both as a teacher and a principal, I think about how assessment affected students. Most notably, I think about younger students and how the thought of math assessment and assessment in general increased anxiousness. I recall Dr. Roland Case talking about assessment often feeling like, from the perspective of students, like an inquisition. Is it possible for us as educators to re-think how we can move assessment beyond an inquisition?

In our first podcast, we're going to explore assessment and all of those feelings, and the idea that assessment can be much, much more than something that's imposed on students. Usha James will be interviewing Garfield Gini-Newman about the ways in which assessment can actually be used to inspire. Rather than prompting feelings of anxiousness and trepidation, assessment can actually be designed to inspire further learning and inspire curiosity. Usha and Garfield explore practical and powerful ways to re-think assessment and how it can be used to really inspire thoughtful and meaningful learning. Stay tuned at the end of the podcast for information about the resources and articles that are mentioned in the conversation.

Usha 00:00
Hello, everyone. Welcome to the very first podcast in our series. I'm Usha James and I'm really excited today to be chatting with my dear friend and colleague, Garfield Gini-Newman in this very first podcast of our series. I was going to say that we're going to start with the end in mind, because we're going to be talking about assessment. However, I know that if I were to start off that way, Garfield would say, "Usha, it's not the end we're going to be talking about, in fact, it's quite the opposite." Today, we're going to grapple with the question, can assessment actually be a source of inspiration? We know that assessment is much broader than student tasks, but in the time we have together today, we're going to focus on assessment tasks and products, and can we design tasks that students will be excited to do? Welcome, Garfield, I'm so glad we get to hang out together this morning.

Garfield 00:54
Thanks so much, Usha, I'm really happy to talk about this topic that I think is probably one of the most important for us to consider in education.

Usha 01:02
Let's get started. I think let's start with a general question, first. You're talking about assessment as a source of inspiration. Can you tell me a little bit about what you mean by that? What are some of the characteristics of assessment that demotivates or inspires?

Garfield 01:20
I'll start by saying when I use this, and I share this notion of assessment as inspiration, I get very puzzled looks often because it's not, well, how people see assessment, they're more likely to see assessment as causing perspiration than inspiration. It's stress inducing, it's anxiety creating. That's unfortunate, because the opportunity to create the tasks that really matter are sometimes being missed. My son Jeffrey, for him things that he enjoyed doing at school, he never actually saw them as assessments. He saw them as—that was the fun part of school and assessment to him was an exam or a test. It's an interesting perception that's been created in education.

Usha 01:55
I was thinking about the Latin etymology of the word to "inspire," to breathe into or to breathe life into, and when I picture our kids' assessment doing that for them, it can be hard to envisage. Maybe you can talk about that a little bit. What does it look like? How would we know if our assessments are inspiring our students?

Garfield 02:18
I think that when we talk about assessments that inspire, it parallels the movement in education around teaching for transfer, as well, because assessments that kids see as meaningful that they connect to, they can see have relevance in their life. Tests just don't do that. Tests are what schools make you do. It's not what you do in life. But having kids publish their own magazine, having kids publish an anthology, having kids host a medieval banquet, these are things that they can actually say that happens, maybe not the medieval part, but the cooking, the banqueting, the publishing, like these are real things. The more we can connect assessments to the kind of activities that are lived every day in our lives. The other piece that allows for is a focus on really meaningful competency. Tests tend to measure ability to recall, work well under pressure, and finish on time. Rich assessments that inspire tend to be more aligned to the kind of competencies that our children are going to need to succeed in an increasingly complex world. When they see both interest and value and the other quick piece I'll add to that is that assessments, in my view, should inspire wonder and just curiosity and get kids to say, "Wow, I want to explore that." And we can do that if we find ways to make them provocative and meaningful.

Usha 03:32
It sounds like—I've heard you use the word, and it sounds like you're talking a little bit about *authenticity*. I think that word has been used a lot, authentic assessments, and I'd love to get your take on it. What do you mean, when you think about authenticity in terms of assessments? You've sort of pointed to it in terms of something that happens in real life. What have you seen that works, and what might it look like?

Garfield 03:56

Authentic is an interesting term in that we have to be careful that, see often I think we may avoid writing a formal paper as not being authentic, but I think we have to be careful. That's very authentic if you want to live in the world of academia. Writing science labs is very authentic if you want to work in the field of science, doing research. My point being that authentic ties to the field in which we're working. It is not that authentic for a student who wants to pursue an apprenticeship to be writing a thesis driven, documented essay. So if we dig deeper, we get to the true competence, but argumentation is, and being able to read deeply and read for meaning. These kinds of competencies—they transfer. I just was working with a school the other day, and instead of writing a formal paper, what if kids had to do their own podcasts, and their podcasts will be built around a thesis and their series of podcasts will be like the arguments in their paper. They will have a conclusion. They have all the pieces that a paper would have only it'll be done as a podcast. I think we can look for authentic as in the context to which students see themselves either living their lives or being employed in as authentic, which may mean at times that the essays and labs are still authentic, depending on the context. But I do think we have to think about the child, their situation, the life they're living, and connect the assessments so they see meaning in them.

Usha 05:15
It makes me think about—one of the questions I wanted to ask you was, what is the connection between *inspiration* and what you're beginning to talk about is *aspiration*? Now, how do those two things connect to each other? And what's the role of the teacher in both inspiring and supporting that aspiration that students might have?

Garfield 05:37
It's a great question, and the reason I really liked that question is, I think sometimes in education, we get caught by binaries. You will see people saying, should we be worried about engagement or empowerment, or you know, this or that, and it's like, well, it's not either, or, once I've inspired students, that's great. They're excited, they want to learn more, but if I don't give them the tools to allow them to achieve, then their aspirations will be undercut. And the work I've done to inspire kids to get them excited becomes frustration, and then the stress and anxiety kicks in. Assessment needs to inspire. This is worth investing my time. I'm excited, I want to learn more. I'm interested in this.

But then the teachers need to build a toolkit kids need to—how will I find the information? How do I decide if I can trust that information? How do I make sense of it? How do I communicate effectively? These are all tools kids need to be able to move from fascination with a topic to being really knowledge curators who can take that information and do something and share it in meaningful ways. That's right, and why I love this question is we inspire, but we don't stop. We inspire and then we build the tools that supports kids need, so that they can do things that at the beginning, they never even thought possible that they surprised themselves at how successful they can be. But that's the way I think we help all kids feel good, feel they can achieve, and be excited doing it. It does mean we can't do this discovery thing where we'll just step aside, and we'll just get kids excited and step out of the way and let them go. I would say no. Build the tools they need. We don't teach answers, but we teach the tools that help kids arrive and aspire to those higher goals that they've set. And that would be the other piece, teach kids how to persevere, how to be metacognitive in their learning, so they can be actively involved. But know they've got guidance. I mean, going back to the etymology, assessment is to, to sit beside—to guide—it

is not to sit in judgment of, and I think that's a really important piece—when assessments inspire and support aspirations, they're done in a way that we sit beside, in support of. We don't sit in judgement of.

Usha 07:35
It makes me think you're using some language that is really about repositioning assessment, and I mean that really in a very literal way—repositioning assessment tasks, because if they are, as you suggest going to inspire kids to learn, that means they appear in a different spot in the learning than perhaps what they have traditionally. Can you talk about that a little bit? I've heard you use the word driver of learning. What happens when we reposition assessments in the way that you're talking about?

Garfield 08:09
Traditionally, assessments—I want to give a nod to Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe in their work in "Understanding by Design" which was hugely influential to me in my career—but even in that planning, it's still, it's a teacher way of planning. I know why I'm teaching lessons. I'm teaching to get kids where I want to get them, but we still too often make the assessment, the proof you've learned. I use the term, we have a proof of learning model. I'm going to teach you stuff and then you'll complete this task as proof you've learned or you'll write this test. Our assessments become proof you've learned. I think we need as you've just said, flip that on and to say, no, the task is the "invitation to learn." It's not the proof. If we want it to truly inspire and excite and sustain learning over time, then it has to be used in a way that launches the learning and becomes the invitation. And I say, "Oh, I need to know more about this, and if I knew that I could add to it." But traditionally, we've got it in the wrong place. You're absolutely right. There is a shift here. I think we often get caught feeling well, kids can't answer that question until I teach them the stuff. We feel this need to front-end load information, and then give the interesting, rich task. I think we have to get over that and say no, allow kids to speculate, to wonder, to say, "I don't know," to try out an answer and say, "Hmm, that didn't work." Error feedback is one of the most important things in learning that we can do is to say, "Hmm, what if you check this out?" That repositioning assessment to be an invitation to learn really has powerful payoff in terms of not just engagement, but the depth of learning the student active role in learning, and it just changes their mindset from one being, "Oh, at the end of learning, I'm going to get this thing thrown at me," versus, "I've got the next few weeks to figure this out." It also shifts the relationship of student and teacher in terms of the support and the guidance that I mentioned earlier that we can provide if the task launches the learning instead of ramps it up.

Usha 09:54
It's interesting because I'm really hearing a connection between the way we frame assessment where it's positioned in the learning, how we support students through that learning and well-being. I'm seeing you make that connection. How important do you think assessment is to well-being? I feel like sometimes in professional learning opportunities in schools, we sort of treat those two things as separate topics. This year, we're going to work on well-being. For next year, we're going to work on assessment. What are your thoughts about that?

Garfield 10:27
Yeah, I think you're absolutely right. I think well-being, even if they're in the same day, they'll still be, "We're going to take a wellness break," as opposed to—wellness should be embedded in what we do

on a routine basis. And our solution to many of the issues around wellness is not the kind of band-aid solutions we sometimes see, but to truly convince kids that you are supported, your ideas are valued, that we're going to work through this together. It's why I'm here to guide, not judge you. These terms are very much embedded in wellness and helping kids develop that sense of self-efficacy, but knowing there's always support behind them.

I think it's a really interesting connection that you're surfacing is that, if we rethink how we use and where we position assessment, we also increase our opportunities to provide that ongoing, timely feedback that's meaningful to students, that helps them feel less judged, because I want to go back to that. I think one of the things that undermines their wellness, and their well-being is this feeling like I am constantly having to be judged. I submit work and I hold my breath. And I by the way, I think some of our kids who are struggling the most get to a point where they choose to fail with dignity, which is to say, "I won't do the work that way, I can't be judged." It is safer for me to fail with dignity. I'm failing the course because I chose not to hand it in. And I'm in control now. Because if I do hand it in my experience has been that I fail. And that hurts. I think we have to look at how are we going to address failing with dignity in a meaningful way that allows students to say, "Hey, that didn't work the first time, but that's okay, because I know I've got support and I've got time to figure this out."

It's also repositioning how we see failure. And notice I use the term earlier error feedback, not really a failure it's just that's my first attempt. I tried it out and I got some feedback, and I fixed that error. So I think we have to reposition when we reposition assessment, what do you mean failure? That was an attempt and we try again. And by the way, I think that aligns to the real world. I'm thinking of a figure skater. Do you think they land their jump the first time? Probably not. They try it again. They figure out where it went wrong. A mechanic fixing your car. You try one thing, that wasn't it? No, you go to the doctor. Do I always get it right the first time? But life is about trying things out and saying, "That didn't work now what will I do?" We deny kids that when our assessments lie at the end. We increase their stress. We deny the opportunity to muck about and try things out. And I think if we really want to support well-being, then assessment needs to inspire. The other two I should have mentioned in my courses, assessment should inspire which we've been talking about. But assessment should also inform learning both for the teacher and the student. What am I seeing? What do I need to work on? What additional information do I need? What competencies should I practice, and it should sustain learning over time. It can't sustain learning when it happens at the end. I think those three things—inspire, inform, and sustain—and that all happens when we reposition where we place our assessments.

Usha 13:13
You're making so many important connections. It almost feels really not doing it justice if we're going to center student well-being or if we're going to think about students' growth mindset, which, you know, we know is a focus for so many people and has problematic sort of things attached to it. When we want to think about these types of things, if we don't think about our assessment practices, we almost undermine our efforts. You've worked with so many teachers and so many districts and so many leaders. What do you see rising as barriers? Because we know teachers are trying to do their absolute best and the conditions that we've had lately, it's been really tough. What do you see rising that makes

it seem not possible to position assessment the way that you're suggesting or what might people say that you're hearing that says, I'm not sure how to do that? And what would you say to that?

Garfield 13:59
Actually, I'm going to answer that, but I'm going to detour for 30 seconds. Just as you were asking this question, I was thinking how the pandemic has kind of impacted my answer in part. I've been fascinated by the number of boards that I've been talking to who in high school have said, "No exams and quadmesters, no exams," and now they're looking for meaningful final evaluations in place of, and it created this interesting opportunity to get people to explore what would be alternatives to traditional exams that would be equally rigorous, give me rich information about student learning, be more authentic in nature, and the cool opportunity I'm finding is that we start saying now imagine if we position that rich task that's going to be your final evaluation, but we began at the beginning of the course and kids got to build it as they go. It is creating some fascinating conversations inspired by the pandemic that has just said, you know what final exams aren't working in this context. Anyway, that's a bit of an aside, it's one of the few things this pandemic has actually brought that's been kind of interesting. It'll be interesting to see if that survives beyond.

The barriers—I would say this is generally good assessment practice faces us. We've had a tension for 30 years around accountability versus effective assessment, and they don't line up. Standardized assessments are about accountability. Traditional exams are about two things, accountability, this belief I have to get you ready for something you're going to face in the future. Do I have all the solutions? Probably not. But I'm going to tell you one of the things we're looking at for some of the grade 12 courses that are cancelling exams, but some of the teachers are stressed. Kids need to know how to write multiple choice. Fine, we're going to have them create a board game where they write and test out multiple choice questions, and they deeply come to understand the construction of how to respond to but in a gaming situation. Can we find parallels? I think we can. I mentioned podcasts, building arguments. I don't think this is a big barrier in terms of flipping on end within the units. We need to figure out ways in which we say, you know what, those accountability measures—how do we have a measure that ensures that kids across boards, across provinces are being considered in a similar way, on a similar basis, because assessments are gatekeepers—whether we like it or not—they're gatekeepers to higher education. We use them, we have to remember, assessment can support learning. I think that's how it's used primarily, but others use it to say, "Who should get the scholarship, who should get the entrance, who should graduate?" but there's an accountability piece. There's a gatekeeping element to it. And the solution to that can be portfolios but that's time consuming. It's harder than scanning a multiple choice test. So we've got this dilemma of accountability, of gatekeeping, running up against, “Yeah, but what's effective assessment? What's good for kids?” Those are some of the challenges that I see. But I do think we do encounter where people want more standard, everyone's writing the same unit test. Because what we're talking about really opens things up for kids, allows more choice and agency for students. Testings are really the antithesis of that.

The last thing I'll say is just our own mindset. So I'll tell a really quick story. A few years ago, I remember a second year teacher I met, Grade 11 Computer Technology course, wasn't coding. The kids had to tear apart the computers, label all of the parts, rebuild the computers and get them working. Then she said to me, "And then I give them an exam." And I said, "What, why did you give them an

exam?" I said, "I think if they can tear apart the computer, label it, rebuild it, get it, I think they get it." She said, "I know but I'm a teacher, I have to give an exam, don't I?" This was, remember, a second year teacher. And I thought, we've got this deeply entrenched belief that testing is something you do when you're a teacher. I think we need to have some conversations and say, "What should be at the core of what we do? And is testing always the best vehicle? And can we balance that?" Maybe part of the answer is not going to be to banish any single form of assessment, but to see, can we have a more balanced assessment plan where there are opportunities for the rich, authentic assessments we've been talking about. And maybe there are times in which a more formal test, but again, I still want to look at and how do we make that less painful for kids, less anxiety-driven and more truly supported?

Usha 18:10
I think it's so inspiring to hear you talk about assessments that can be inspiring, and wondering from the perspective of teachers who are thinking, "Yes, this is inspiring, I want to embark on this journey, I want to get started." And of course, there are other teachers out there who are going to share examples with us that they have been indeed framing really inspiring assessments. What advice would you give to teachers who are hearing this and saying, "Yeah, this is a direction I'd like to go in, or I'd like to continue on, or I'd like to expand and enhance my ability to engage?" And what would you tell them? What steps or pathways or signposts should they be looking for?

Garfield 18:55
I'll offer three pieces of advice. The first one is to look to the good work that's already going on. I think there's a lot of interesting stuff going on in schools, a lot of interesting tasks. And often, I mean, they're rich tasks, it's just they they're sitting at the end of units. So one of the starting points, it's just look in your own practice and go, could I flip that to the front? And what are the possibilities in terms of better scaffolding to start. Let's look at our own practice and go for this task, my kids love doing it. But why couldn't I start with it? Because I think when I talked with our daughter's science teacher in physics, and he has kids building bird feeders that are squirrel proof, applying physics, he has them doing interesting, authentic tasks, but they tended to lie at the end of the unit. I think the starting point is, do you already have interesting tasks that could be flipped? Start there. If you don't, do what people are doing. Look at life and say, podcast that seems to be interesting. let's make one. Tools to help kids do self-publishing. I mean, there's a plethora of things we can do, but I think a lot of them are already going on in classrooms. We've just got them built in a way that has it be the end instead of the beginning.

Two: We use in our work as we play with this idea of Thoughtbooks. Give kids a place, their personal place. And I want to say very clearly, we intentionally call them Thoughtbooks, not thought journals because journaling has a very entrenched place in education. Thoughtbooks are anything from your smartphone, to a tablet, to a booklet where I can jot down ideas, draw pictures. It's a place for me to muck about and change my mind and try ideas. Give kids that space. Thoughtbooks, by the way, don't work when your task is at the end. They become somewhat redundant, but they're at the beginning, so I can go, “Oh if I were to create a bird feeder. Here's my sketch. Oh, given the physics I learned today, that's not going to work, here's what I'd have to change.” So we can see the evolution of their thinking, and they can see, :My learning is paying off. Look at the changes I've made.” So employing a Thoughtbook is a metacognitive tool that allows kids to engage with their learning in meaningful ways throughout.

The third thing that we've been playing with, is this idea of a guide to success, where we take the traditional rubric and we say, "Can we rethink the rubric so it becomes truly a learning tool.?" Instead of listing four levels by changing single words like some, most, all, now, what if we were really, really clear to kids on what, what they need to do to complete the task, and we were really clear about what excellence looks like. And then we invited them to say to us, I'm going to go back to your words now. What if we invited kids to come to us and say, "So what do you feel is working well? What do you think you need to still work on? What are you aspiring to? Is there anything else you'd like to add to what you're doing?" They come to us for guidance—not to be judged—because traditionally, kids hand in their draft, they hold their breath, and they wait for the teacher to judge them. What if we flip that on them and then said, maybe an invitation to say come to me and let me know what you're really feeling good about, and what you want me to help you with? We change the conversation. I think those three things, you know just get that interesting task up front, give kids a place to muck about and change their mind and make mistakes and try it again, and give them a tool that helps guide them. And I think we can make some significant progress.

Usha 21:57
Thanks so much, Garfield, I think you've just, in a really clear and again, I'll say inspiring way I think helped capture a lot of what we've been talking about assessment and what you've been playing with in classrooms and...and what we're learning from teachers. I agree with you—I think the pandemic has shone a spotlight on what it is we could do differently. It's actually opened some possibilities up and I know people are going to be excited to dabble in that. I just want to really highlight that. So much of what you've talked about really shows a commitment to centering students, to putting them at the center of our planning, their futures at the center of our planning, their well-being at the center of our planning, their deep learning, their aspirations, their agency, and I think that is so powerful. We can't—for all of us who are thinking about equity and anti-oppression and inclusion—at the heart of that is centering students, student experiences, student strengths and student needs. And I think we can't do that without thinking, re-thinking assessment, and repositioning it so that it inspires and engages students deeply. What a great start to our podcast series, Garfield. It's been so fun, such a pleasure to have a chance to chat like this. I can't wait to hear about the examples that teachers might share with us as well. Thank you so much. Really fun.

Garfield 23:28
It's been wonderful. Thank you.

Warren
We hope you've enjoyed episode one of *Re: thinking education*. In this podcast, you heard a variety of really practical ideas presented by Garfield and Usha, and they talked about three key resources that could be used to support your learning about ways to reframe assessment as inspiration.

In the podcast, there was mention of the use of Thoughtbooks. You can learn more about Thoughtbooks by following the links in the show notes to discover more about the *Quick Guides to using Thoughtbooks* developed by The Critical Thinking Consortium.

Second, Garfield mentioned the use of *Guides to Success*. Again, we've placed the link in the show notes where you can find examples of *Guides to Success* as well as an overview of how you might use them with your students in your contexts.

And finally, we'd invite you to check out *Creating Thinking Classrooms*, the foundational and seminal work that was produced by The Critical Thinking Consortium to explore ways that we might work to inspire, to nurture thinking classrooms.

Warren
You've been listening to Re: thinking Education, a podcast from The Critical Thinking Consortium. To learn more about The Critical Thinking Consortium, visit our website at tc2.ca where we have many resources that help teachers and students become great thinkers. We'd also love to hear your feedback and your thoughts and questions about this podcast. Send us an email at mail@tc2.ca. Be sure to click the subscribe button for future episodes. Thanks for listening.