

Recognizing Hard Edges in Self-Assessment and Goal Setting

How do we recognize when our self-assessment and goal-setting practices have hard edges and lack alignment with our own beliefs and values and the needs of the whole person? The following sections describe some indicators to watch for.

Inviting Students to Self-Assess Just Because It Is What We Are Supposed to Do

Doing anything just because we have to (and not because we feel it holds value) creates a hard edge for everyone. Students will know immediately if we are engaging in processes that are inauthentic and we will feel frustrated both with ourselves and with how students self-assess. Before we engage students in self-assessment, we must be clear about its purpose and how it will look and sound when it is authentic. Practicing the subskills identified in the section “Consider Subskills Students May Need to Develop” helps us develop a shared language and recognize self-assessment successes when they emerge directly within a learning experience. We may need to spend time simply recognizing it in our classrooms, so we can begin a dialogue about when to do it and for what purposes. One-on-one conferring can be one of the most authentic entry points for beginning discussions around self-assessment. This may be where we need to begin.

Providing Unclear Expectations and Criteria for Success

Lack of clarity signals the death of strong self-assessment. Students need to be able to compare their own learning experiences to an articulated learning goal or target. They need to understand how learning develops over time and in what ways so they can ascertain where they are in relation to the goals and targets. When we as teachers do not share these goals with students, we are closing them out of their own learning stories. Learning then becomes an exercise in guessing what the teacher wants this time and deciding whether to attempt it. With little reassurance for success, it is no wonder many students opt out of the effort.

Setting Unclear Timelines

As long as students see that finishing quickly is more important than finishing well, they will hesitate to revisit their learning in order to improve. Checklists for completion and little reference to quality learning create learners who will march through tasks with little concern for whether the work reflects strong learning. When we accept

less than our students' best, we communicate that finishing is more important than proficiency. Students need time to reflect, time to experiment, time to practice, and time to refine. Without time, self-assessment falters and quality learning falters with it.

Having Hidden Agendas

There are times when students just want to know what we really want from them. Sadly, our education system has created learners who can be suspicious of our choices and motives. For example, when we say we encourage self-assessment but we rush the process or insert it at the end of learning, students begin to wonder what we really want to accomplish. When we share the learning criteria and the learning continuum, but spend little time developing each piece, offering feedback, or formatively assessing, we communicate a false promise of proficiency. When we ask students to revise their work, but do not teach them how to do this effectively and deny them the time they need to do it well, we reveal a hidden agenda. Students begin to question the purpose behind their work and see that the only real audience is us at this moment in time.

Failing to Build a Classroom Culture of Trust, Risk Taking, and Optimism

Self-assessment is really hard when students don't feel safe to be honest and embrace their mistakes. In these circumstances, falling short of proficiency feels final. We need to create classrooms where there is time for reinforcement and practice and where everything is not always new. Moving too quickly with minimal attention to retention and application stifles a learner's ability to be reflective. In these instances, students may stop caring about what others think about the few choices they actually get to make, and they certainly won't take the time to consider how they, themselves, feel about their learning. They become used to success in a single paradigm, and the paradigms of trust, risk taking, and optimism have very different expectations and boundaries from what they are experiencing.

Neglecting to Set Goals, Establish Supports, and Take Action

When any form of assessment falls short of action, it is not formative. This certainly applies to self-assessment. Simply deciding how a learning artifact should be assigned a value is not true self-assessment for learning. It is not enough to know what is wrong if we don't know how to fix it and are not given the chance to do so. Self-assessment must result in the expansion of a learner's tool kit to address concerns and challenges. When self-assessment is authentic, students and teachers make decisions together about what background knowledge to develop (vocabulary,

basic skills), what experiences need to unfold (field trips, interviews, community connections), what experiments students need to undertake (searching for examples of strong hooks in writing, exploring ways that substances combine in chemical reactions), and what enrichment is necessary (creating new solutions, using complex data sets). When students are part of this conversation, the opportunity to design learning and assessment that addresses learner needs increases tremendously.

Confusing Self-Assessment With Self-Evaluation

The responsibility for evaluation rests with teachers as part of our professional obligation to verify progress toward learning goals. Certainly, our conversations with students through the course of self-assessment and reflection can inform our judgments, but allowing students to assign a value to their learning hardens an edge for teachers (we can feel painted into a corner by promising students a say in how they are evaluated). It hardens an edge for students, too, because they may come to associate the act of self-assessment with grading, which increases the stakes and distorts the purpose away from formative growth, toward summative judgment. Students may become confused and reluctant to be honest about weaknesses and challenges. Their need for self-preservation may override any need to reflect honestly. In order for self-assessment to be truly formative, it must remain separate from evaluation.

Implying That the Only Reason to Self-Assess Is to Get a Better Grade

Teachers can find it difficult to explain to students who are proficient why they should self-assess and set goals. What do they have left to learn? How should they improve when they are already perfect? This is a strong misconception perpetuated by schools, and a primary reason why enriched understanding appears on learning continuums. Our work with these students is not only to help them recognize their strengths but also to identify areas for improvement. These students benefit in the long term from being challenged. We can tell these students that while they have demonstrated proficiency, their learning today should look different from the learning they do tomorrow. Their essay writing should continue to improve, their problem solving should become more proficient, and their thinking should become more complex. When school is simply about a grade, continual learning is taken off the table.

The solution is to be as explicit with these students as we are with all students about how they could approach the next task to improve areas they choose. We do not want students to believe their job is to complete a task and simply get a good grade. We want them to continue learning and become invested in their work. Resilience and stamina are key outcomes connected to self-assessment for all students.