Softening the Edges of Self-Assessment and Goal Setting

Softening the edges requires that teachers return to the learning continuum and consider how the whole student will interact with the learning and assessment experiences. When we invite students to be introspective, they offer us the gift of seeing the world through their eyes, knowing their learning stories, and witnessing them author the next chapter of their own growth and development. Here are some considerations for soft edges.

Establish a Clear Purpose for Self-Assessment

How learning experiences unfold after self-assessment will, ultimately, determine how well students engage in the process next time. If increased proficiency is the result, they will see a clear connection between formative and summative processes. Success breeds success. Stephen N. Elliott, Thomas R. Kratochwill, Joan Littlefield Cook, and John F. Travers (1996) explain, "By making students aware that they can 'think about their thinking,' you will also help them to improve those cognitive behaviours that result in better classroom performance" (p. 270). We must make sure students see how their own assessment practices lead to a more fulfilling classroom experience.

Build a Safe Environment

Students have to feel certain that taking risks will be supported and that personal reflection does not come with a penalty. When we foster open discussion and encourage vulnerability, we are rewarded with a more honest self-reflection. It is important that we never belittle a student's attempt to reflect. Instead, we reward students for their metacognitive journeys by ensuring their classroom experiences shift as a result of strong self-assessment. When we celebrate risk taking, supportive listening, active thinking, and problem solving, the edges of self-assessment soften because we are attending to learners' needs and supporting the development of positive beliefs about themselves as learners.

Ensure Self-Assessment Reflects the Learning Context

When self-assessment processes are connected to actual learning experiences, the results will yield far more authentic learning. Reflecting must be strongly connected to the learning environment and the kinds of learning experiences students engage in to foster growth. The best kinds of self-assessment happen in the moment, when

students are working on an authentic learning experience and spontaneously consider the quality of their products or ask questions about the learning they are exploring. When this doesn't happen automatically, it may be necessary to design invitations to reflect. However, separating the process completely from the learning can seem contrived. When students view the process as an integral part of the learning cycle, they develop proficiency both with self-assessment and with the content they are exploring because the two go hand in hand.

Ensure the Needs of the Whole Student Are Supported

Students need to have a role in determining how self-assessment will be lived, and we have to attend to the whole person in the process. For example, students may be uncomfortable reflecting on their strengths aloud, so we need to negotiate how and when the reflection will happen. If we are truly nurturing the whole student, we must balance their need to self-assess with our need to support how they communicate. For some students, self-assessment may be most effective when spoken aloud, while other students may prefer to write down their reflections. Some students can reflect quite automatically, while others need time to process and think before committing to an assessment.

We also must remain attentive to the skills of identifying strengths and challenges which may prove difficult for some students because of an unwavering belief they hold about themselves and the degree of success they assume they will experience. In other words, they may be thinking, "Why are you asking me to identify successes when we both know there aren't any?" "Challenges? Where do you want me to start?" In these instances, we will have to be increasingly explicit in helping students identify growth in relation to a variety of criteria. This helps them move away from an all-or-nothing mentality and toward an understanding that there is strength in every product and process.

There may also be cultural factors we must attend to when approaching self-assessment. In some cultures, talking about or celebrating oneself is considered disrespectful, so we may need to find ways for students to identify areas for growth and celebration that are less direct (talking with a trusted partner, marking a checklist, or highlighting their work with colors indicating strengths and challenges). Another indirect way to help these students is to simply shift the conversation to future learning and away from current attempts by asking, "What would you like to try tomorrow that went well today?" Including students in decisions related to self-assessment invite us to support them appropriately.

Self-Assess During Learning

For the benefits to be most strongly felt by both teachers and students, self-assessment must be part of the learning cycle, not an afterthought. When it occurs at the end, students may perceive it as just another thing to do for the teacher. Again, self-assessment must be actionable. When students set goals and clarify strategies for growth, they need the opportunity to apply the strategies immediately. This is the only way they will experience a relationship between metacognition and increasing proficiency. Self-assessment during learning can also support connection making and cross-curricular thinking. It is important that students come to understand that goals and strategies can impact learning in multiple contexts. Their thinking, not the task in which they are engaging, is the pivot point. This is powerful knowledge for developing learners.

Invite Students to Think About Their Thinking and Feelings Often

Carol Ann Tomlinson (2005a) asserts that "students' attitudes about learning and about themselves as learners are of great importance in establishing, maintaining, and developing students' commitment to the learning process" (p. 263). Ask students questions about their thinking and feelings (students as young as five years old can share thinking and feelings), and make it part of your language every day. Ask questions about decisions students have made, their reasons for those decisions, what they are most pleased with, and what they would do differently next time if they could.

Work Toward Learning Experiences With an Authentic Purpose and Audience

Students who are engaged in what they are creating and exploring reflect naturally. This means students need choice in what they are doing and for whom they are doing it (someone other than the teacher when possible). The true sweet spot of self-assessment occurs when students are invested in their learning and the products they are creating. When we tap into their interests and share with meaningful audiences, learners buy into the idea of getting better and their learning becomes very personal. This is what learning should feel like as often as possible.

Invite Students to Reflect on Both Product and Process

Encourage students to discuss learning of both product and process (for example, "My bookshelf seems top-heavy. Next time before beginning construction, I will spend more time on my predesign and measurements to make sure it is balanced."). If a student is lacking an element, discuss it, and help him or her figure out *how* to

develop that element next time. For example, if a student has a weak introduction to an essay, explore how to develop it through a template that organizes thinking or by asking strong questions before he or she begins to write. In this way, we help students understand that the way to grow is to employ new strategies for arriving at products and that a once-and-done approach rarely works for even the most experienced learner.

Let Students Choose Their Own Goals

If students do not set their own goals, they may slip into compliance mode, which rarely leads to meaningful learning. No one loves being told what they need to fix and how they should do it every time they try something new. Taking risks is directly tied to retaining responsibility for the outcomes. Make sure students discuss their goals and action plans using language they understand and relate to. For example, instead of engaging students in criteria like "Essay shows strong clarity of language," try "Your audience was able to get inside your head." This allows learners to really come to understand proficiency and its indicators.

Confer One on One With Students Often

Rich conversations about personal growth are most successful when they are with someone we trust. When teachers build a trusting relationship through one-on-one conferring, students will naturally build confidence and begin to develop similar relationships with their peers through strong modeling. When we hear students discussing learning with each other, we know we have facilitated a truly authentic experience!

Notice and Celebrate Moments of Self-Reflection Every Time

We may have to force ourselves to be on the lookout for these moments because they are easily overlooked. Teachers need to highlight and discuss moments of self-reflection with students. We need to make them part of our learning conversations. In effect, we are encouraging students to develop a learning relationship with themselves. As Hall and Simeral (2015) state, "If you realize you aren't so wise today as you thought you were yesterday, you're wiser today" (p. 68). We are teaching students that knowing what we don't know is a strong first step in learning. We are also teaching them that learning isn't always easy; difficulty and challenge are inevitable, but that doesn't mean they cannot overcome those challenges. In fact, we believe in them so much that we insist they exercise reflection, resilience, and drive in the quest to reach their goals.

References

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