

Recognizing Hard Edges in Summative Assessment

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

Forgetting About the Learning Goal

When we lose sight of the learning goal and, more specifically, the action within the learning goal, we may find ourselves asking students to spend inordinate amounts of time on memorization that doesn't serve a higher purpose. Certainly knowing facts and details can support an analysis or lead to strong solutions, but when memorization is done for the sole purpose of regurgitation for points, the edges of both assessment and learning have become very hard, and intellectual potential is undermined.

Splitting Hairs

When we begin to depend on technicalities to articulate the difference between percentage points or summative grades, our need for professional confidence is diminished and a hard edge forms. When we find ourselves saying things like, "You lost half a percentage because of this missed comma" or "I docked two points for forgetting to name all six examples of an invertebrate," we have shifted from thinking and talking about learning to thinking and talking about how a grade was calculated. This is a slippery slope into game playing, compliance, and disengagement.

Focusing on Quantifying Learning Instead of Developing Learning

There are times when we get so caught up in trying to assign the right mark to student work that we forget our real goal is to make sure our grades reflect strong, proficient learning. When we find ourselves worrying that our grades are not reflecting a bell curve or an even distribution (some 90s, some 80s, some 70s, and so on), we may have stumbled on a hard edge of assessment. In these cases, if we spent as much time thinking about how to guarantee successful summative demonstrations as we did figuring out how to measure and quantify learning, we would have classrooms of students who experience proficiency, and measuring *degrees of ineptitude* would become far less important to us than working to eradicate ineptitude.

Making Assessment a Guessing Game

If a summative assessment is truly a verification of proficiency related to learning goals, then all key aspects of the learning goal should be assessed. If our assessment practices have been building readiness skills and understanding through formative assessment and feedback, and they have been focused on a shared understanding of a learning goal, then no aspect of a summative assessment should be a surprise. If it is important enough to learn, it is important enough to measure. Even more accurately, if it was important enough to measure, it was certainly important enough to learn. The two are reflections of each other. No games. No surprises.

Measuring Criteria Not in the Learning Goal

When we measure criteria outside learning goals (such as things like behavior, completeness, and neatness), we are creating confusion and encouraging compliance from students. Our assessment communicates what is important, and when we measure external factors, we are miscommunicating what is important. For example, points for a title page or coloring neatly rarely reflect an entire learning goal. By marking them, we are stating that they are the most important things to learn. To remedy this and still encourage students to take pride in their efforts, it may be helpful to consider these types of nonacademic descriptors as non-negotiable. In this way, we work alongside students to make sure these items are completed if they are important. When a student hands in an essay without a title page when we have requested one, we simply hand it back and ask for it to be completed. Docking points communicates that we are willing to accept less than the best from our students. Assigning points for outside criteria assigns them an importance that is misplaced. This creates a hard edge and is counterintuitive.

Administering Summative Assessment Empty of Meaningful Context

Summative assessment without a meaningful context is empty assessment. It completely neglects the whole student and the need to make sense of the world by applying skills and understanding in a context that matters. It diminishes the importance of learning and the experiences that have led to this learning. It also diminishes the importance of the learning goals by reducing them to simple test items that depend on recall.

Allowing Students to Opt Out of Assessment

Giving zeroes for missed work allows students to opt out. This action communicates several things to students about our beliefs and motivations. First, it shows we have little faith in a student's ability to learn and demonstrate that learning. Second, it shows that we cannot create contexts in which the student wants to succeed; in essence, we give up. Third, it shows that the student's only responsibility is to declare the intention to learn. The learning itself is not the student's responsibility because when he or she chooses to disengage, we permit it by assigning a zero. Myron Dueck (2014) explains the futility of this approach: "Academic threats have lost their potency for students who are already disillusioned with their school experience and thus inclined to think, 'If I'm already failing, why should I care about another zero?'" (p. 14). Richard DuFour (2015) explains a solution to this challenge: "I contend that the best way to teach students responsibility is to insist that students do what responsible people do. Responsible people do the work. Responsible people seek assistance when they are struggling to succeed" (p. 184).

Applying Blanket Scores to Multiple Learning Goals

The edge of assessment is hard when scores are meaningless to teachers, students, and families. When we do not organize summative assessment by learning goal and, instead, calculate an overall score and enter it into each goal, we have undone our work to accomplish learning goal-based assessment. This results in a misrepresentation of proficiency or lack of proficiency. We have to be prepared to break down the proficiency measures by goal, so goal setting and feedback are targeted and meaningful. A single score communicates nothing and does not, in any way, support growth, accuracy, or reliability.

Encouraging Hoop Jumping

We must avoid the narrative that says the most important thing in school is to fulfill the teacher's expectations on any given day. We want students to express their thinking, make choices, and build independence and confidence. We want the learning goals to guide our work, not the particular brand of summative assessment each teacher chooses. When our language ("Get this done" or "Just hand it in") and our actions (allowing students to give less than their best or assigning random work) support hoop jumping, this is all we will get from our learners, who are capable of and need so much more.

Making Summative Assessment Stressful, Difficult, and Unenjoyable

Summative assessment does not have to be what happens *after* all the fun. Assessment, when contextualized with an authentic audience and purpose, can be highly engaging, inviting students to truly invest in their own demonstration of learning. As Cassandra Erkens (2009a) says, “When our assessments are engaging, we almost can’t *stop* learning from happening!” (p. 23). Summative assessment should be a celebration of hard work, not a punishment.

Giving Bonus Points

We may think we are doing students a favor by offering bonus points for effort and compliance, but we are most definitely not. This practice demonstrates little faith in students’ ability to achieve proficiency on their own and reduces clarity in the communication of learning to students and families. We may find ourselves wondering if students achieved proficiency by demonstrating learning related to the learning goals, or if they have fallen short but achieved a higher score because they complied with unrelated requests (such as handing an assignment in early, including pictures, memorizing labels, or lining up quietly). We want clarity and accuracy in our assessment practices, and bonus points do not support these aims.

Administering a Summative Assessment Without Practice

We have to work very hard to avoid getting caught in the assign-assess paradigm (wherein we simply assign tasks and then grade them, making no time for formative assessment, feedback, or practice). If everything students do is calculated into a grade, students stop taking risks. If learners are assessed before having the chance to build readiness and explore the learning goal, the edges have become unbearably hard. The learning cycle must include practice, formative assessment, feedback, and self-assessment prior to summative assessment. To determine how learning may unfold, preassessments are first needed to help teachers determine the amount of practice and instruction necessary. Then, formative assessments are essential to build a culture of risk taking, problem solving, creativity, and engagement. As David Culberhouse (2014) says, “The problem with being answer-focused is that we begin to ask fewer and fewer questions, as we already have the answers. We become less and less inquisitive, less and less creative, and less and less innovative.” Simply assigning and assessing is no fun for anyone.

References

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