Softening the Edges of Summative Assessment

Strong summative assessment must first allow prior appropriate opportunities to practice, rehearse, research, seek feedback on, and engage in self-assessment. This does not mean there shouldn't eventually be a time when we verify understanding and independent proficiency. However prior to the summative assessment, students need to actually be allowed to *learn.* They also need to be allowed time to recognize and verify their own learning. This leads to truly empowered learners who are no longer dependent on a teacher to define their growth. To support strong learning and build confidence and hope, here are ways to soften the edges of summative assessment.

Convey Joy and Optimism When Discussing Learning and Assessment

We must talk about learning as being fun and accessible. We should not have to scare students into learning. We need to avoid talking about *big tests* and *huge assignments*. This makes learning sound scary. Some students experience tremendous anxiety when we talk about things in this way. Articles in the news speak to this stress and the ramifications for our learners (Dwyer, 2014; Strauss, 2013). They lose their confidence which, as Tom Schimmer (2014) notes, is essential for success: "There is nothing more important to a student than confidence—with it, students can learn anything; without it, they'll learn nothing" (p. 16).

Learning is fun and school is interesting. If it isn't, then we need to try a different approach. Fear and learning do not go hand in hand.

Spend Time Exploring and Developing an Assessment Philosophy

When our actions and choices are grounded in our values and beliefs, assessment edges soften. To discover our beliefs and understand how to live them authentically through our assessment practices, we may need to read books, talk with colleagues, and attend professional learning sessions about assessment. We may have to step back often and ask ourselves whether the choices we are making serve ourselves and students in the long term. We should hold high standards for ourselves and our students by consistently affirming that our practices are reflecting a belief in ourselves and our learners (and haven't slipped into a grade-generation mentality). Sharing our philosophy with our students ensures accountability to our beliefs.

Observe and Assess Continually as Part of Instruction

When we watch and listen to students as they learn, we can make decisions that soften the edges of summative assessment for both ourselves and our students. For example, when we increase the amount of observation during practice and formative learning time, we can document emerging proficiency and decrease the number of learning goals to assess summatively at the end of the unit. This, in turn, honors the students' learning as it manifests and reduces the time we spend marking unnecessary summative assessments when we have reliably verified that students have reached proficiency earlier on. We could ask ourselves how often a student needs to demonstrate learning before we are confident in our own inference about their proficiency. Our answer may allow us to feel comfortable determining when a student is proficient, even when it occurs before we intended to measure it. Furthermore, when we verify learning earlier in the learning cycle, we can engage students in developing enriched understanding and give them time to practice and explore extended learning.

Understand the Difference Between Work and Learning

While work and learning are connected, they are not synonymous. Fixating on the work instead of the learning intended to emerge from the work can often limit flexibility in our summative assessment approaches. This is why understanding our learning continuum is so important. If we can remain focused on proficiency indicators and the various targets that precede proficiency, we can avoid the hard edge of frustration when students do not complete the work. We can begin to ask ourselves what the right work is. We can imagine opportunities to approach learning in multiple ways. We can distill the most important pieces and make sure the experiences associated with those pieces are engaging and well supported. We want more for our students than working *just to work*.

Put Summative Assessment in Its Place

There is a clear place for summative assessment in the learning cycle. It is important to verify learning and share this information with students and families to celebrate, enlist supports, or determine future actions. However, summative assessment is not the reason for schools or for learning. It should not be viewed as the end of learning, as the final word on the value of learning, or as the communicator of potential and ability. Summative assessment verifies learning at a moment in time and allows educators to determine the degree to which learners have achieved proficiency

related to learning goals. Summative assessment has reached its potential when it blends seamlessly with everyday learning. Carol Ann Tomlinson (2005b) says of summative assessment:

> [It provides] opportunities throughout a unit for both student and teacher to understand a given learner's progression at a particular moment in the flow of the unit. [Summative assessments] call on students to express their understanding of the genius of the topic, using essential skills and habits. They are a natural part of instruction, not an intrusion or interruption in it. (p. 162)

We can put summative assessment in its place when we view it as a natural phase of learning for one or more learning goals, leading directly into the next learning goal and the experiences and explorations that follow.

Make Sure Students Are Ready

The softest edge of summative assessment for both teachers and students occurs when every student is prepared to demonstrate proficiency when the time comes. There is nothing like confidence in knowing we can do something well, and in being the teacher who helped that happen for the learners in our classrooms. Myron Dueck (2014) recalls a time when he did not engage in this practice: "I believe that my former strategy of surprising my students on test day frustrated the most capable learners and discouraged the most vulnerable" (p. 71). Engaging in transparent practices, just as we engage our students in assessment, communicates a belief that the learning stories are theirs and that they are our partners in the development of learning. This kind of equality is key for nurturing independent, engaged learners who are willing to take risks and explore learning goals with confidence and competence.

Separate Behavior and Achievement Data

Assessing behavior is important and suitable in many contexts (measuring skills like collaboration, organization, persistence, or handing in assignments on time, for example), but when behavior is addressed through achievement data, it muddies communication around summative assessment and overall academic proficiency. For example, when we reduce grades if assignments are handed in late or when we increase grades if learners are quiet and cooperative, the summative assessment result can miscommunicate proficiency or lack thereof. Instead, we should assess learning goals separately from behavioral goals. Practically speaking, this means refraining from using academic assessment to punish students for behavior such

as failing to complete work, handing in assignments late, or refusal to comply with classroom rules. Certainly consequences are appropriate for these challenges, but they must fall outside academic assessment. By revisiting our work with the learning continuum and determining the building blocks for exploring our learning goals, we can focus our summative assessment on the academic proficiency indicators.

Be Prepared for Students to Occasionally Redemonstrate Across Reporting Periods

Learning can be revisited at any point, and redemonstration may not completely align with reporting. For example, we may choose to add a question onto the end of a unit exam assessing the previous unit's learning goals. Not all learners would necessarily attempt the question, but if they did redemonstrate proficiency, their new assessment result would replace their older one, and their grade in a previous reporting period may change. In these cases, despite a lack of proficiency in the original term's grade, the students can be reassured that learning is continual and that a learning goal can be revisited in the next reporting period. This softens the edge for students and for teachers, too, because reassessment can be held off during the week prior to report cards to support balance and sanity.

Avoid Group Grades

Collaboration and group problem solving are powerful instructional approaches. When our learning environments capitalize on the ideas of many, creativity and capacity building become part of the everyday experiences of our learners, and this supports the development of the whole student. However, instruction and learning are separate from summative assessment, and determining individual learner proficiency by assessing group efforts can be misleading. Our professional responsibility to infer the degree to which each student can demonstrate learning goals means we need to be crystal clear about who knows and can do what. Strong group collaboration creates a synergy that is undeniably advantageous to advancing understanding and productivity but, at some point we want to determine how each member of the group is advancing his or her learning. Ken O'Connor (2007) summarizes:

> Group scores may not accurately reflect the achievement of each student and therefore would be unfair for some members of the group. This problem can be addressed by recognizing that cooperative learning is essentially a learning activity, *not* an assessment tool. (pp. 48–49)

Our instructional planning can tap the potential of collaboration, while our assessment architecture can be designed to assess individual degrees of proficiency. We can have both.

Allow Summative to Become Formative When New Evidence Replaces Old

Getting hung up on separating summative events from formative events can be counterproductive in many contexts. When the learning experiences emerge out of student interests, questions, and experiences, and observation is a prominent source of assessment information, we are always on the lookout for demonstrations of proficiency. We can be comfortable with the idea that learning today may be *replaced* by learning tomorrow. In these cases, the only time assessment is summative is when we report progress to stakeholders. Otherwise, learning is always ongoing. New evidence replaces old in a highly organic fashion that honors the whole student. This continuous model of learning opens up the learning space and softens the edges for us and our students. The monitoring and capturing process becomes far more natural and less regimented.

Foster Emotional Safety

We have to be especially cautious with the language we use about summative assessment. Summative assessment has the potential to foster or destroy hope. We must be insistent on "regarding the child first and foremost as adequate and complete, without references to purposes and achievements, or social attachments for that matter, by which she has to justify her worth" (Lamb, 2001, p. 214). We have to remember that students come first in our classrooms. Their emotional safety and feelings of worth surpass the results of any assessment event.

Mix It Up

We need to feel encouraged to administer alternate versions of a summative assessment when allowing for redemonstration. Summative assessment verifies learning, and there are multiple forms of learning. We want to be completely sure learning has grown, so asking students to apply their learning in new contexts is reasonable and even desirable.

Bring the Learners Into the Conversation

Softening the edges of our summative assessment practices by truly examining our own and our students' needs (intellectual, emotional, social, and physical) can be

challenging. There are things that need to be sorted out. There are beliefs that need to be challenged. There are habits that need to be adjusted. None of this is easy for teachers or for students. Years of exposure to traditional grading practices make a change to assessment that supports exploration, deep learning, and responsibility difficult to understand, especially for high school students. We have to be willing to share our beliefs and reasons for trying new approaches with our learners. We need to allow them to ask questions and seek reassurance that this new assessment approach will not result in lower grades, aimless work, and a reduction in emotional, social, physical, or intellectual safety. It can be surprising how deeply embedded assessment understanding is in our students. Many have come to believe that a score reflects their ability, their potential, and their value as students. We have to teach our learners that their value rests in who they are and how they engage in the things that are important to them.

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