

## Recognizing Hard Edges in Preassessment

How do we recognize when our preassessment 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.

### Basing a Preassessment on Something Other Than the Learning Goals

A hard edge for both teachers and students may occur when we design a preassessment without taking the time to clarify the learning continuum and deeply understand the learning goals. As with any assessment, if a preassessment is not aligned with the learning goals, then it can become an isolated event with little relevance. Preassessments in preexisting resources or programs must be examined carefully to ensure alignment with the learning goals. When a preassessment is not aligned with learning goals, it miscommunicates the destination and importance of our learning exploration in the long term and undermines emotional and intellectual safety.

### Using a Preassessment Result as a Summative Score

When we treat a preassessment like a summative event, a hard edge is formed. In this case, we are stifling a learner's need to practice and make mistakes, which can create a lack of emotional safety and willingness to take risks. A preassessment comes *before* any opportunity to explore and practice and is in no way indicative of where learning will end up—it is the catalyst for learning and conversation. Treating every assessment event summatively removes accuracy and validity from our assessment architecture because we are not measuring proficiency at the conclusion of the learning cycle but are instead measuring (and holding students accountable for) learning *in progress*. This is not the intention of preassessment.

### Failing to Take Action

Preassessment can feel like a waste of time if we never use the information we get from it. Some teachers may preassess because they feel they have to, but then never use the assessment to build responsiveness for themselves and hope for their students. It is essential to understand why we are preassessing, when it makes sense to do so, and what kinds of questions to ask. Too many times, I have witnessed preassessments that sit in a drawer and are never revisited and never impact future learning choices. This is a hard edge—a waste of time and energy, and a destroyer of hope.

## Presuming to Know Our Students

It is critical that we separate what is new to us, as teachers, from what is new to our students. It is human instinct to imagine our reality is the same others experience—to imagine the order and way we learn is the same for students. We know that our students are learning things differently than we did—at different rates, at different times, and in different ways. If we are truly going to be responsive to student needs, we must first take time to preassess students in our classrooms to discover their learning stories. Otherwise, we fall into the trap of assuming we know what students know and what they can do; we assume students have had the same learning experiences that we or the person sitting next to them had. D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly (2000) explain that we cannot assume the student receiving the assessment message is neutral. They bring something to the interaction. The work we are doing is human work and we are always entering a student's story “in the midst” (p. 63). Remembering this can help us soften the edges for both ourselves and our students. It allows us to dig more deeply into the students' prior knowledge, into the ways of thinking they have developed over time and experience, and the attitude they bring to the learning space. Stephen R. Covey (1989) says, “Seek first to understand” (p. 235), and his words ring true for our work in building learning relationships with our students. We must seek first to understand our students. Only then can we hope to construct assessment and learning experiences that will truly support learning.

## Using Preassessment Data to Refuse Learning Invitations

A hard edge forms when we deny students the opportunity to engage in high levels of thinking, inquiry, and exploration of the learning goal until they have mastered all parts of the preassessment. Again, learning is not a lockstep activity. It is organic, and the best way to learn skills and gain knowledge is often to practice them within a meaningful and rich context. Memorization, on its own, is not engaging, but memorization in an authentic context serves a greater purpose for students. Preassessments should not set up an if-then paradigm, where students only get to do the fun stuff after they have memorized thirty vocabulary words. This approach is sure to fail to engage students. Instead, engagement in vocabulary through a video, role play, or a discussion is much more likely to develop long-term contextualized understanding.

## Making a Preassessment Too Complex

A preassessment so complex that it is impossible to diagnose how, when, and with whom instructional choices need to occur is a hard-edged preassessment because it removes our ability to respond to both our own and our learners' needs. Taking an

assignment and calling it a preassessment does not work because we are asking students to synthesize when they are ill-prepared to do so. A strong preassessment provides specific information about students' challenges and existing knowledge. A preassessment that is too complex can do little more than frustrate students and set them up for disengagement.

## References

- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Covey, S. R. (1989). *The seven habits of highly effective people: Restoring the character ethic*. New York: Simon & Schuster.