

Softening the Edges of Preassessment

A well-considered and well-constructed preassessment can help us create soft edges for both teachers and students when the following occurs.

Preassessments Serve a Clear Purpose

When we use preassessments to guide daily instruction, celebrate growth, and develop readiness, it reassures our students that the preassessments serve a purpose for everyone. Karen Hume (2008) notes, “Students will be watching to see how you make use of their preassessment information, and the effort they put into future preassessments will be influenced by your decisions” (p. 141). Using the preassessment as a springboard for future learning demonstrates a clear purpose. Inquiry can also follow a strong preassessment because the destination is clear and students are free to explore topics in ways that make sense to them. Clarity can often be a springboard for creativity and exploration, both indicators of a soft edge.

The Purpose Is Shared With Students

It is essential to be upfront with students about the preassessment purpose. Many teachers avoid preassessments because we fear we will set up students with a failure mindset and create a hard edge. This is no small concern. If students perceive the preassessment as something that “counts” or as something that assigns their intelligence a value, they may well end up feeling defeated. Creating a classroom climate that is growth oriented means being clear about how learning unfolds and how each step is to be celebrated. Identifying what we don’t know is part of learning. Conversations like these are essential in our classrooms.

When students really seem to be struggling with the preassessment purpose, we need to recognize it immediately and make time and space to talk it through. Many of our students are preconditioned to believe all assessments count and that they define ability and potential. Jeffrey Overlie (2009) observes, “As other students score low on assessments, they see themselves as unsuccessful and lose confidence. They feel embarrassed, and their motivation decreases” (p. 182). If we want to change this paradigm, we need to include students in the conversation at all stages. We want our students to feel confident and optimistic, not defeated before we even begin. When we don’t talk to students about our assessment practices, we remove their sense of agency, which can be very discouraging. Tom Schimmer (2014) suggests approaching the very first assessment in a way that ensures all students

can demonstrate success, explaining, “A way of serving *all* students and of ensuring the best possible *first impression* for how students feel is to over-prepare them for their first evaluation” (p. 21). When we follow up the first preassessment with an immediate response and celebration, we can begin to nurture this cycle of optimism. Kathleen Kryza, Alicia Duncan, and S. Joy Stephens (2009) assert, “It is essential to create an interdependent community where students feel safe to grow and learn, question and experiment, overcome failure and enjoy success” (p. 16).

We Really Notice Our Students in All Their Complexity

Preassessment also allows us to *notice* our students and recognize when aspects of a foundation we assume exists, in fact, does not. Some students may have missed or failed to retain key ideas and skills that ready them for the learning goals we are about to explore. Recognizing these foundational gaps at the outset allows us to address misconceptions and a need for additional instruction and practice before we dive into learning experiences that may provide more challenge than learners can handle. This attention to readiness creates an environment that supports learning rather than simply measures it. It also invites students into the learning conversation in a way that offers them the exact right amount of challenge. Lev Vygotsky (1978) refers to this “just right” challenge as *the zone of proximal development*, and Karen Hume (2008) builds on this concept, explaining:

The zone of proximal development is the zone of instruction—where learning takes place. This is the point where the student combines existing knowledge and skill with the right amount and type of assistance to meet the achievable challenges of the lesson. (p. 218)

Preassessment offers us the opportunity to make sure our instruction is designed to meet students right where they are and invite them to stretch just enough to ensure learning occurs in the best way possible.

References

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