

Why Student-Engaged Assessment Matters

Excerpt from Leaders of Their Own Learning, by Ron Berger

The most important assessments that take place in any school building are seen by no one. They take place inside the heads of students, all day long. Students assess what they do, say, and produce, and decide what is good enough. These internal assessments govern how much they care, how hard they work, and how much they learn. They govern how kind and polite they are and how respectful and responsible. They set the standard for what is “good enough” in class. In the end, these are the assessments that really matter. All other assessments are in service of this goal—to get inside students’ heads and raise the bar for effort and quality.

Student-engaged assessment is effective because it draws on these internal assessments that occur naturally for students. Unfortunately, students and teachers often don’t know how to tap into this level of assessment and learn how to capitalize on it. Students frequently have widely varying internal standards for quality and aren’t clear about what “good enough” looks like. Some students have internalized a sense that they don’t have a value or voice in a classroom setting and that anything they do will be inferior to the work of the “smart kids.” In other cases, they believe they have only one chance to do something and begin to work from a place of compliance and completion rather than working toward quality through a series of attempts.

Teachers frequently fall into the trap of simply saying, “try harder” without giving students specific targets, feedback, time to revise, and a purpose for doing quality work. What students really need are tools and support to assess and improve their own learning and the motivation to do so. Motivation is in fact the most important result of student-engaged assessment—unless students find reason and inspiration to care about learning and have hope that they can improve, excellence and high achievement will remain the domain of a select group. The following sections describe the key reasons why student-engaged assessment practices matter.

Motivating Students To Care:

Student-engaged assessment puts students back in the driver’s seat, in charge of their own success. It makes clear to them that hard work and practice pays off—just as it does for them in sports, music, or video games— and that the immediate, clear feedback they get in the other pursuits can also guide their academic progress.

Changing Mindsets

Student-engaged assessment requires and inspires students and teachers to change their mindsets about intelligence, effort, and success. As they experience success and track actual progress, their positive mindsets strengthen.

Engaging Students as Leaders of Their Own Learning

As students are given the tools to understand and assess their own strengths and challenges, their ability to take ownership increases.

Teaching Reflection

Skillful reflection is at the core of becoming a self-directed learner and thus is essential for college and career readiness. Student-engaged assessment builds reflection into every step of the process, ensuring that students develop the skills to reflect deeply and concretely, beyond vague statements of preferences, strengths, and weaknesses.