

STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT

The Key to Stronger Student Motivation and Higher Achievement

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From *educational Horizons*

In the current era of standards-based education, student self-assessment stands alone in its promise of improved student motivation and engagement, and learning. Correctly implemented, student self-assessment can promote intrinsic motivation, internally controlled effort, a mastery goal orientation, and more meaningful learning. Its powerful impact on student performance—in both classroom assessments and large-scale accountability assessments—empowers students to guide their own learning and internalize the criteria for judging success.

What Is Student Self-Assessment?

Self-assessment is defined as a process by which students:

1. Monitor and evaluate the quality of their thinking and behavior when learning.
2. Identify strategies that improve their understanding and skills.

Self-assessment occurs when students judge their own work to improve performance as they identify discrepancies between current and desired performance. Self-assessment also identifies further learning targets and instructional strategies (correctives) students can apply to improve achievement. ►

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Thus, self-assessment is the combination of three components related in a cyclical, ongoing process. Essentially, students identify their learning and performance strategies, provide feedback to themselves based on well-understood standards and criteria, and determine the next steps or plans to enhance their performance.

The Self-Assessment Process

Self-monitoring, a skill necessary for effective self-assessment, involves focused attention to some aspect of behavior or thinking. Self-monitoring students pay deliberate attention to what they are doing, often in relation to external standards. Thus, self-monitoring concerns awareness of thinking and progress as it occurs, and as such, identifies part of what students do when they self-assess.

A second component of self-assessment, self-judgment, involves identifying progress toward targeted performance. Made in relation to established standards and criteria, these judgments give students a meaningful idea of what they know and what they still need to learn. The standards are benchmarks and the criteria are guidelines for interpreting the level of performance students have demonstrated. The development and application of criteria in evaluating current performance enable meaningful evaluations, as long

as the criteria are appropriately challenging.

The third essential step is that students choose subsequent learning goals and activities to improve partially correct answers, to correct misunderstandings, and to extend learning. Because students at this stage need skills in determining learning targets and further instruction that will enhance their learning, they should be aware of options for further goals and instruction. Once the appropriate “instructional correctives,” as they are referred to, are complete, students resume self-monitoring.

Theoretical Rationale for Self-Assessment

Theories from at least three areas of study provide convincing rationales for nurturing and enhancing student self-assessment.

Cognitive and Constructivist Learning and Motivation Theories

Students construct meaning, in part, by self-assessing prior to and during learning. Students organize, evaluate, and internalize when learning, and self-assessment is part of that process. They connect new knowledge, understandings, and skills with what they have already stored and used. Self-assessment fosters students’ ability to make these connections; provides a mechanism to enhance learning in a meaningful, rather than rote,

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manner; and results in greater motivation and confidence.

The goal-theory perspective on motivation represents a cognitive theory about how students internalize different types of ability goals and the effects of those goals on self-assessment, persistence, and achievement. Research has focused on two types of goals: *mastery goals* and *performance goals*.

- A mastery goal is one in which the student focuses on the task at hand and what needs to be done to improve knowledge, understanding, and skill. With this orientation, students reach mastery through such cognitive processes as thinking, self-monitoring, and generating solutions. Additionally, students will tend to immerse themselves in the task and continually check their progress.

- In contrast, performance goals focus on the outcome and whatever can be done to ensure the outcome; the final score or grade receives more attention than attaining improved understanding. This orientation promotes negative self-concepts about ability to perform and reinforces conformity to what will best ensure a positive outcome, which becomes more important than process or actual improvements in understanding and skills. Obtaining the required score and being judged “proficient” are more important than learning.

Self-assessment is integral to a mastery goal orientation, for it is a

skill that enables students to know how well they are progressing in their knowledge and skills. Conversely, a performance orientation relies on the teacher and others to schedule learning tasks, to determine success or failure, and to evaluate the final product.

Metacognition

Metacognition involves the capacity to monitor, evaluate, and know what to do to improve performance. This includes skills such as checking, understanding, predicting outcomes, planning activities, managing time, and switching to different learning activities. This set of skills relates positively to increased achievement.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy involves students estimating what they can do and the likelihood of successful performance. Self-perception develops gradually as students connect their successes and failures to factors they believe have caused the result. It is important to emphasize the influence of situation and context upon self-efficacy. Self-perceptions of competence are part of self-efficacy and refer to beliefs about general ability or knowledge and skills to do well (e.g., “I’m good in math and science.”). Students with high expectations are more likely to persist; those with low expectations often avoid tasks or give up. ►

Students need to self-assess to know when they are learning, how much effort they must expend for success, when they have been successful, when they are wrong, and which learning strategies work well for them. Accurate self-evaluation enables students to see what they have mastered and identify what needs further work. Students who experience success with moderately difficult and challenging tasks will attribute their success to ability and effort rather than to external attributions such as luck or help from other students. Making these internal attributions is, in turn, based on the ability of students to self-assess and self-evaluate.

Implications for Practice

For classroom teachers, student self-assessment develops an awareness of which metacognitive strategies to use and when to use them. Teachers and students learn these skills when they establish clear learning goals and articulate evaluative criteria that enable students to assess their own work. Those practices engage students as they actively participate in the learning process and become more connected and committed to the learning outcomes.

Student self-assessment also mandates that teachers learn to pass the evaluative responsibilities to their students by scaffolding and modeling goal setting, evalu-

ation, strategy adjustment, and reflection.

Additionally, students who believe that they can successfully complete a task are more motivated and engaged. Teachers should therefore maintain high expectations of performance as students establish goals and work through their self-evaluations. That way, student self-assessment in the classroom establishes clear learning targets, defines evaluative criteria, provides tools for assessment, and allows time for reflection.

Clear Learning Targets and Criteria

Establishing clear learning targets helps students understand what they should learn and participate in developing evaluation criteria and quality benchmarks. According to research, students achieved more when they set specific goals for themselves. Students must also understand the process goals of reaching the established learning objectives, since they are more satisfied with their performance when they can evaluate their work; providing clear steps enables them to reach their goals and results in higher levels of self-efficacy.

Teachers can allow students to make choices from a predetermined range of activities, which individualizes instruction while allowing students to work at their

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appropriate levels. Restricting the range of choices ensures that the activities align with the curriculum and balances the cognitive challenge with opportunities for success.

In addition, providing evaluation criteria through rubrics, models, or anonymous exemplars helps students concretely understand outcomes and expectations. They then begin to understand and internalize the steps necessary to meet the goals. However, not all rubrics are equal: to promote learning they should indicate levels of proficiency, not just scores for grades. That information can provide learning benchmarks along the way. Such awareness of the learning process is the first step in training students to gauge their own performance as an informational, rather than a judgmental, matter.

Self-evaluation

Once students understand the goals and criteria, they must have opportunities to evaluate their own performance and make adjustments. Teachers should convey the concept that mastery is controllable and that the goal is knowledge attainment, not just task completion.

Using domain-specific goals and subgoals, combined with positive attributional feedback, will increase students' persistence toward the greater goal as they feel the sense of accomplishment

that comes from applying effective learning strategies.

Finally, students must be able to make adjustments to their work prior to graded evaluation. At this point students react to feedback and adjust their strategies, typically through rubrics, rating forms, or visual organizers. These concrete self-evaluation methods provide objective feedback and identify specific areas of strength or weakness. The feedback can be further used to guide instruction and better meet students' needs.

Reflection

Reflection helps students think about what they know or have learned while they identify areas of confusion, so they can create new goals. Evaluating what they learned, what they still need to work on, and how they can get there can all support deeper understanding rather than superficial knowledge. Students benefit from explaining their work and their own evaluation of quality through reflective activities such as conferences, written correspondence with parents or peers, and written self-reflections or checklists.

To help teachers implement student self-assessment in the classroom, Rolheiser identifies four stages of teaching student self-assessment. At each stage, initiating different levels of teacher and student involvement gradually gives students less structure

and specific direction and more responsibility and freedom.

In stage one, teachers involve students in determining criteria. Often students brainstorm ideas and negotiate with teachers to arrive at final criteria that are specific, immediately applicable, and moderately difficult. In this early stage it is important to use students' language in naming and describing criteria.

In stage two, the teacher shows students how to apply the criteria to evaluate work samples. Providing examples of evaluated work helps students understand, specifically, the meaning of the criteria and how to use them. Students need to practice classifying products using the established criteria. Cooperative learning groups can facilitate this process.

In the third stage, teachers provide students feedback concerning their application of the criteria. At this point it is helpful if they show students qualitatively different products to illustrate how criteria are applied. This process requires feedback not about whether an answer or product is correct but rather about how well students understand and apply the criteria. Discussion allows students to resolve questions and uncertainties about the criteria. Feedback should clearly relate to the criteria and, eventually, students should be able to initiate feedback themselves to justify their ratings and

initiate a dialogue with the teacher about self-evaluation.

The last stage involves identifying subsequent learning goals and strategies that can attain the goals. Initially, the teacher determines the goals and strategies; eventually students construct their own goals and strategies with teacher guidance. Thus, teachers fully integrate self-assessment into their teaching in stages three and four, when they can give students feedback about self-assessments as well as future instructional goals and learning strategies.

Rolheiser's "growth scheme" is useful to check how often teachers use student self-evaluation and to determine any necessary improvements in the process. Modifications are needed at different grade levels, but even elementary students can understand and apply criteria to evaluate their own and others' work.

Summary

When students set goals that aid their improved understanding, and then identify criteria, self-evaluate their progress toward learning, reflect on their learning, and generate strategies for more learning, they will show improved performance with meaningful motivation. Surely, those steps will accomplish two important goals—improved student self-efficacy and confidence to learn—as well as high scores on accountability tests. *ED*

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