

Teaching Students to Self-Assess and Reflect for Deeper Learning

By Kate Stoltzfus

How can teachers shift from traditional assessment to develop reflective learners able to thoughtfully track their own progress? It's about having a toolbox of strategies that support reflection and help students own their learning and think deeper, educators Starr Sackstein and Connie Hamilton told teachers at ASCD's Empower19 conference on Sunday. Even students in kindergarten can look at their successes, compare their abilities to a final goal, celebrate progress along the way, and provide feedback to others and themselves.

Reflection, as Sackstein and Hamilton define it, is the act of looking back on learning and self-assessing against the standards. Teachers need to give students the chance to explore what they know and can do in their own words, then adjust instruction based on students' responses.

The key elements of reflection are

- Guiding, open-ended questions
- Specific examples to support
- Awareness of the steps of process itself
- Areas for improvement

Sackstein, who records videos of individual grading conferences with her students each semester to see what they've learned, allows students to choose how they want to relay their knowledge. They first gather a collection of work to prepare supporting examples. Some meet with her during class while others work on independent projects; others choose to record audio files and submit screencasts to show their work. Students also keep documents to track the specific feedback they receive throughout the year.

If Sackstein notes that a critical mass of students struggles with the same issue, she'll do a short minilesson or work with a small group. What's important is knowing how to play a role in facilitating students' self-assessment, including giving students opportunities to understand specific standards in language they can understand.

To scaffold the reflection process for students, teachers can use the following guidelines, according to Sackstein and Hamilton:

Restate what the assignment asked you to do in your own words

Discuss your process for completion

Address standards appropriate to the assignment and how you met them using evidence from your work

Teachers should also consider the following questions:

What did you learn?

How did you overcome challenges?

What would you do differently next time?

How would you assess yourself?

Then, students should write about how exactly they accomplished an assignment:

1. What steps were taken specifically?
2. What challenges did you face?
3. How did you overcome the challenges?
4. What did you learn?

Although students may struggle with the process at first, they can learn over time to talk about the standards tied to their mastery, use more specific evidence to support their accomplishments, and lead discussions around their future goals.

“As practitioners, we don't always take enough time to do the reflective work to make sure kids get what they need,” said Sackstein. “These reflections give me the opportunity to know what each student is working on and adjust my feedback. I'm spending less time giving feedback because I'm not looking for everything, I'm looking for something specific.”

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