**Assessment Works Best When Students Are in the Driver's Seat**

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*Photo Credit: EL Education*

Truth: Most of the important things we learn in life can't be measured on a standardized test. In fact, a lot of things that do appear on standardized tests are assessed capriciously and inaccurately. Witness [this absurd and humorous account of how 7th graders' understanding of poetry is assessed on a standardized test](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/01/07/poet-i-cant-answer-questions-on-texas-standardized-tests-about-my-own-poems/)—written by a poet who can't answer the questions about her own poems.

As teachers we want to teach our students the *important things*—the fundamental concepts of disciplines, academic work habits (perseverance, critical thinking) and skills, as well as how to be a good person, with the confidence and competence to contribute to a better world. But if standardized tests don't measure these things, how do we know if our students have learned the important things?

We need [student-engaged assessment](https://eleducation.org/resources/introduction-to-leaders-of-their-own-learning-why-student-engaged-assessment-matters), a system of interrelated practices that position students as leaders of their own learning. Often it takes place in students' own heads while they are learning. It's the kid in the back row wondering, "Do I understand this? What questions do I have?" It's the student who pulls a draft of her paper from her backpack and thinks, I need to rewrite this conclusion. What did my workshop group tell me again?"

Think of "student-engaged" assessment like driving a car. Students who are engaged step into the driver's seat, tentatively at first and often with the teacher coaching from the passenger seat. What are the coaching moves that enable students to become confident drivers of their own learning?

**Teach Students to Say Where They're Going**

[Learning targets](https://eleducation.org/resources/collections/learning-targets-and-checking-for-understanding-collection) name what students are expected to know or be able to do at the end of a lesson. Many teachers post and even say aloud the learning target for the lesson. However, this start-of-the-lesson ritual can easily be absorbed into the background noise of your classroom if the target isn't student-friendly. A learning target is only as powerful as the [student's ability to explain it](https://eleducation.org/resources/students-discuss-the-power-of-learning-targets).

Taking the time to unpack the vocabulary and key skills or understanding with students is an essential step of transferring ownership of the learning from the teacher to the student. [This video of students unpacking a learning target](https://vimeo.com/44052219) shows how explaining what meeting the target will look like and sound like makes all the difference in their ability to drive their own learning.

**Teach Students to Reflect and Identify Missteps**

We've all had the experience when driving of getting *almost* to our destination and then losing cell service. Yikes! Until we can recenter and reconnect with our electronic guide, we're lost. As students approach the learning target, they also need to refocus on the destination and get a little feedback to help stay on course. For a student engaged in a long-term writing project, for example, this might look like a structured [peer critique session, with clear criteria and a practiced feedback protocol](https://vimeo.com/84899365).

Kind, specific, and helpful feedback from a peer, teacher, or coach with a clear understanding of the specific criteria for success on the project or problem is the most useful "redirection" students can receive. Feedback invites students to ask

* Did I use my best evidence?
* Are my details accurate and clear?
* Where did my argument get off track?

This is the thinking of students who are learning not only to drive their own learning but also to make wise judgments about the route forward.

**Teach Students to Set a New Course**

Given the opportunity to take the trip of a lifetime, you wouldn't just go to the airport and hope for the best. You'd probably spend hours (or hire someone else to spend hours) reading reviews, researching options, and analyzing itineraries. Learning that yields strong achievement requires similar planning. Teach students to review and analyze the path they've taken so far. What strategies and mindsets got them this far? What didn't work, and how can they avoid those pitfalls on the next journey? What data illuminate past learning and point to next steps toward a new destination?

Importantly, high-leverage reflection must happen regularly and over time in order to truly inform students' learning. For example, one 7th grade social studies teacher provided the following progress tracker and time to complete it at the end of every period when students were working independently on a long research paper. Students didn't just check the boxes; they also circled up at the end of the period to share the verbal and written evidence of their progress and to appreciate each other's habits of learning.

***Sample Progress Tracker***

Name:

Goal: I can demonstrate a growth mindset during independent work time.

Directions: During reflection time, fill in the box for each habit you demonstrated during work time. Be prepared to share evidence during debrief!

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Date | I seek challenging work. | I keep trying even when the work is hard. | I try again when I fail and use new strategies. | I use all my resources before I ask the teacher. | I encourage others to keep trying. | Evidence to share: |
|        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
|        |        |        |        |        |        |        |

Finally, the biggest payoff of student-engaged assessment comes when students present their own work to an authentic audience. Presenting high-quality work, and doing so like a professional, transforms the once-tentative traveler into a confident guide for others. [Watch these kindergarten ornithologists wow an audience of teachers and scientists](https://vimeo.com/69120172).

**Self-Assessment Is Learning for Life**

In American life, one of the most important tests a person takes outside of school is a driving test. For many good reasons, you have to perform—demonstrate your skills, not just fill in bubbles on a paper. Student-engaged assessment invites us to create opportunities for students at all grade levels and in all subject matters to metaphorically read the driving manual, take the written test, practice on the road with lots of feedback from an expert instructor, and finally demonstrate the skill for a real audience.

At the end of the day, as the driving examiner writes "passed" on the form, the student knows that she drove smoothly, followed all the signs, and brought the examiner back safe and sound. She also knows that she could have gotten a teensy bit closer to the curb in that parallel parking spot. That assessment, inside her head, is the one that counts most because it motivates her to continue learning well after the test—in fact, for the rest of her life.



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