

Student Self-Assessment- A Teacher's Secret Weapon

"Self-assessment is essential for progress as a learner: for understanding of selves as learners, for an increasingly complex understanding of tasks and learning goals, and for strategic knowledge of how to go about improving." –Philip Sadler

Students want to feel empowered. They want to take control over their learning and have a "say" in the final outcome of their classroom experience. In the classroom, teachers often wonder, "Is there a way for students to assign agency to their learning, while at the same time excel in testing, motivation, and appreciation for school?" Yes—the answer is student self-assessment.

Student self-assessment (SSA) can play a powerful role in the relationship between a student's motivation and academic achievement. If correctly implemented, student self-assessment can promote intrinsic motivation, higher test scores, goal orientation, and more meaningful learning. It enables students to guide their own learning and internalize criteria for success.

What is Student Self-Assessment?

Before I begin to point out research that supports the benefits of student self-assessment, or use specific classroom examples, I must start at the beginning. SSA is defined as a process by which:

- ❖ Students judge their own work to improve performance.
- ❖ Students identify discrepancies between current and desired performance.

- ❖ Teachers identify further learning targets and instructional strategies for students to apply and improve achievement.

Self-assessment is about more than test scores; it's about self-improvement (Andrade and Valtcheva, 2009). To put it bluntly, meaningful self-assessment is education.

Research—What have studies shown?

Through SSA, students have improved both skills and motivation. I will note two specific studies that prove students have become better writers because of self-assessment. The first, performed by Joyce Hillyer and Terry Ley (1996), showed the progress of second grade students using self-assessment in their writing portfolios over the course of the year. Initially, 12% of students considered themselves below average writers, and 25% simply average. By the conclusion of the study (after using self-assessment through interview, portfolio, conferences, and written assessment), *all* students saw themselves as above average writers. Students identified cognitive changes in writing such as writing better and longer stories and improving punctuation and spelling. They also cited some affective changes such as devoting more time to writing, feeling smarter, enjoying writing more, and being proud of themselves as writers (Hillyer and Ley, 1996).

Additionally, a study of 7th and 8th grade students' writing by Andrade and Boulay (2003) found a positive relationship between self-assessment and the quality of writing. Their findings indicate that having students use model papers to generate criteria for a writing assignment and using a rubric to self assess first

drafts is positively related to the quality of their subsequent writing. This included “effective handling of sophisticated qualities such as ideas and content, organization, and voice” (Andrade and Valtcheva, 2009). When translated to traditional classroom grades, results also proved positive. The average grade for the group that engaged in rubric-referenced self-assessment was a B, but the average grade for the comparison group was a C.

Additionally, to help teachers implement student self-assessment in the classroom, researcher Carol Rolheiser has devoted much of her life to exploring this topic. She states, “Self-evaluation is really the combination of self-judgment and self-reaction, and if we can teach students to do this better we can contribute to an upward cycle of better learning” (Rolheiser, 2009). Therefore, she developed four stages that have become a successful model for teaching student self-evaluation. Stages and some additional advice will be discussed later in the article, but below is a chart for easy reference for teachers.

Stage 1	Involve students in defining the criteria that will be used to judge their performance.
Stage 2	Teach students how to apply the criteria to their own work.
Stage 3	Give students accurate feedback on their self-evaluations.
Stage 4	Help students develop productive goals and action plans.

Theory to Practice: “How-to” use self-assessment in the classroom.

Establishing clear learning goals and criteria is integral for students to succeed in evaluating themselves. Criteria for assessment should be developed together, with both teachers and students—as it will help students understand what it is that they should be learning. According to researcher James McMillan, students achieved more when they set specific goals for themselves (McMillan and Hearn, 2009). Providing clear steps enables students to reach their goals and results in higher levels of self-efficacy. Higher self-efficacy translates into higher achievement (Rolheiser, 2009).

This above-mentioned notion of “goal setting” is a key element for teachers to focus on when using SSA in the classroom. Upon completion of self-assessment, students should focus on future learning goals and activities that will help correct areas that may need improvement. There are two types of goals that should be brought to your student’s attention: **mastery goals and performance goals**. A mastery goal is one that the student focuses on the task at hand and what needs to be done to improve understanding and skill. To complete this goal, students will need to “immerse themselves in the task and continually check their progress” (McMillan and Hearn, 2009). In contrast, performance goals focus on the outcome—the final score or grade. For self-assessment, students should focus more on mastering skills and understanding, rather than striving for the grade. Through these mastery goals, teachers can help promote intrinsic motivation and positive learning in students.

Upon completion of a written self-assessment or rubric, students should take time to compile their future goals. This can be done orally in pairs, or written at the end of the rubric. Goal setting makes it clear to students that SSA does not simply end after the assignment is complete—learning and improving is constantly in motion and teachers should help students create goals that are specific, immediate, and realistic. See example of goal setting rubric below:

Goals	Specific actions I will take to improve my future learning and understanding:
Goal 1	
Goal 2	
	Steps I will take to complete these goals with the help from my teacher:
Step 1	
Step 1	

However, one cannot just assume students know *how* to assess themselves—it is a skill that must be taught. It is the teacher’s duty to work with the following suggestions on successful self-evaluation. As mentioned earlier, the first four steps are taken from Carol Rolheiser’s stages of student self-assessment; the other ideas, formed by my colleagues and me, offer some practical insight on using this system in the classroom.

1. Involve students in defining the criteria that will be used to judge their performance.

Students must know and be able to explain specific criteria on what they are evaluating themselves; what does the teacher *expect* students to accomplish in this assignment? Involving students in this determination of criteria initiates a negotiation between teacher and student. It can also increase student satisfaction and goal commitment.

2. Teach students how to *apply* the criteria to their own work.

Teachers must provide models or examples that help students understand specifically what the criteria means to them. As Rolheiser states, “teacher modeling is very important, as is providing many numerous examples of what particular categories mean, using language that connects criteria to evidence in the appraisal” (Rolheiser, 2009).

3. Give students accurate feedback on their self-assessments.

Teachers should arrange for students to receive feedback from not only the teacher herself, but also from peers, on their attempts to implement their self-assessment criteria. Another option could be for teachers to provide a rubric with space for “teacher’s comments” and hand it back to student with feedback and helpful ideas for growth.

4. Aid students in using self-assessment to improve performance.

Teachers can help students connect particular levels of achievement to the learning strategies they adopted and the effort they expended. Teachers can also aid students in organizing clear goals for themselves and their future projects.

5. Provide sufficient time for revision after self-assessment reflection.

Reflection is a crucial part of self-assessment and there must be sufficient time for it. Evaluating what they learned, what they still need to work on, and how they can get there can all support deeper understanding of their goals. Reflection helps students think about what they know or have learned while they identify areas of confusion.

6. Do not turn self-assessment into self-evaluation by counting it toward a grade.

Research has shown that counting self-assessments toward a grade can prove to have more negative repercussions than positive ones. Some teachers and parents believe that if students are given the chance to mark their own work, they will take advantage and inflate their grades. While this may be true for some students, the best way to avoid this problem is not count the evaluation toward a formal grade.

A few more interesting tips—What you can expect when using SSA:

*Overly confront student's feelings and beliefs about self-assessment and deal directly with misconceptions.

*Start small—create many short, quick self-evaluation opportunities for students.

*Expect a range of reactions from students as you help them get better at evaluating themselves.

Change student's perceptions on self-assessment—It is NOT boring!

Self-assessment can be fun! As a drama teacher, I have brought lighthearted and engaging ways to integrate self-assessment into the classroom that is not only about rubrics or written assessments. For example, a game that has proven to work with students of all ages is YES/NO/MAYBE or “vote with your feet.”. In this game, the teacher will write YES on the left side of the board, MAYBE in the middle, and NO on the right. She will then ask students questions about how they are doing in the class, or questions on how to gauge their understanding of a subject. For example, the teacher may ask, “I feel I work well under pressure.” The students will then physically move to the side of the room and stand by the answer that best describe them. This can also be used to measure specific learning, i.e. “I understand why the main character did what he did at the end of the book.” Or “I tried my best at this assignment and gave it everything I could.” This activity not only promotes student self-assessment and thinking critically, but also creates a classroom community and an engaging environment.

Another idea for collaborative and fun self-assessment is a simple activity such as passing a large poster board around (in small groups) in a round table fashion, with each person contributing an idea about why self-evaluation is important. These ideas could then be collected and posted on a class chart for

reference whenever a teacher begins a self-evaluation process. This simple idea can keep students goal oriented and stress the importance of being able to judge their own work.

Thoughts and Conclusions

While researching this topic on SSA, I thought of past colleagues who have used this practice freely in the classroom. I sent out several questionnaires, and one particular teacher offered these thoughts on the vital importance of student self-assessment:

There are pedagogical reasons and practical ones. I write self-assessments based on growth, so the learner must determine how far she has come and where it is she hopes to go—(students) reflect upon past work and establish individual goals for future work. Self-assessment allows for me to have very personal and individual information to share with parents about each child. I also learn a lot about students when reading their assessments that time constraints might otherwise keep me from knowing. For instance, I have a student who acts out a lot in class, and her assessments show a very low opinion of herself and her work. I'm not sure that I would have picked up on her self-esteem problem as quickly without her personal feedback.

All in all, through SSA, students have become more self-aware. They are more confident in who they are as people, and more comfortable with their likes and dislikes. They have also become more motivated and positive—they are more likely to persist on difficult tasks, be more confident about their ability, and take greater responsibility for their work. All teachers know that as students get older, they sometimes become more cynical about traditional testing and schooling in general. By using self-assessment in a different way, students feel they have a say in the outcome of their classroom experience.

The positive affects of self-assessment in the classroom spans beyond the students. Self-assessment can, in fact, make you a better teacher. Teachers can listen to where her students are struggling, and hear their opinions on specific assignments for the future in a more timely manner. According to researcher Linda Bruce, teachers reported that they understood their students better after reading their reflections on completed work. "I found it helpful to hear about the difficulties the students had while doing the assignment. It helped in my assessment." Students liked it because "I could ... let the teacher know what I put the most effort into," and also, "if there were problems, you could tell her ... so she could understand and take it into reference" (Bruce, 2001). Teachers took these messages from students into consideration and described the adjustments they made as a result. Students also reported positive feelings about the goal-setting activities designed by their teachers. Their strong approval was most often linked to the opportunity to choose their own goals.

Because of student self-assessment, both teachers and students reported improved performance. Reflective activities also promoted personalization of the learning as students analyzed their individual needs. Students enjoyed a more democratic input into their learning context and in tern became more motivated and goal oriented. Through these results, it is obvious that using SSA in the classroom will improve student's understanding and awareness of who they are as people. To quote Marcus Aurelius, "*Nowhere can man find a quieter or more untroubled retreat than in his own soul.*" I challenge and encourage teachers to implement this practice into their classrooms. It will be well worth it.

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