

Learning to Soften Hard Edges

Transforming Learning Summit



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Session outcomes:

1. Explore key assessment practices through scenarios
2. Select and explore personally relevant hard edged assessment practices
3. Apply a specific process to refine assessment design and processes

Assessment's Hard and Soft Edges

Softening the edges means:

- 1) **Clarifying our inner voice as connected to:**
 - a. Our emotions
 - b. Our beliefs and values
 - c. Our needs
- 2) **Clarifying assessment:**
 - a. Its purpose
 - b. Its impact
 - c. Its potential
- 3) **Creating alignment through:**
 - a. Curiosity
 - b. Research and exploration
 - c. Design

How to recognize a hard edge	How to recognize a soft edge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We feel “boxed in” by a practice • We suffer emotional pain as a result of a practice • Our sense of self and our capacity is diminished by a practice • We feel helpless as a result of a practice • We feel a separation between who we are and what we do 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have clarity about the actions we will take to grow • Our processes invite flexibility, responsiveness, and creativity • Our practices support investment, compassion, and optimism • We experience efficacy and agency in decisions about our own actions • Our voices are heard and our physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs are met

Process for Softening the Edges

- Start with an assessment process we suspect may have a hard edge. Allow ourselves to acknowledge this reality.
- Reflect on the intended needs we are trying to meet (intellectual).
- Review the holistic (emotional, physical, and social) needs of teachers and students; review our values and beliefs.
- Determine the degree to which our assessment process aligns and, if it doesn't, why.
- Consider alternatives (research when needed).
- Reframe the assessment and make new decisions.

Two Stories

A ninth-grade student worked through practice questions on a homework assignment. She worked diligently and confidently for forty-five minutes, but every three or four minutes she would sigh as she moved from one question to the next. Eventually, when asked why she seemed so distressed when she was clearly able to complete the practice without much difficulty, she explained that she hated her homework assignments. She clarified further:

Here's how it works. Teachers teach and then they give about six hours of practice and it doesn't matter if you "get it" after two. People who get it spend all that time working and those who don't get it don't do it at all. But nothing happens to them except their final may not go that well.

When she was asked why she continued to do practice homework when she clearly didn't need it, she replied, "I don't know. I guess I don't want to disappoint anyone."

On another occasion, a learner was preparing for a test with his father. As part of their study session, the father asked his son to predict what topics and major concepts he thought would appear on the assessment; he asked him to consult his notebook and determine the key aspects of the course. The son seemed to resist this approach, muttering that it was useless to try to predict what the teacher might ask on the test. He stated that he had tried this approach in the past and it just hadn't worked. He explained:

If you ask students to learn something for an assessment and then it doesn't appear on the assessment, you are teaching them that assessments aren't going to be about what we learn. It becomes a bit of a trickery session where kids try to guess what you're going to pick, as opposed to learning what they need to know, and it makes me feel pessimistic about studying because assessment is a game. But that's the reality of high school. It sucks.

	Scenario One: Homework	Scenario Two: Exam
Type of Assessment and Intended Purpose		
Current Hard Edges		

	Scenario One: Homework	Scenario Two: Exam
Needs of the teacher Values and beliefs that may be impacting things		
Needs of the student Values and beliefs that may be impacting things		
Possible approaches to soften the edges		

Formative assessment

- Share criteria with students
- Equip students with strategies for growth
- Involve the students in decision-making
- Use formative assessment to guide differentiation
- Use both smaller and larger formative assessments
- Stay curious – What is going on? What do learners need?
- Be aware of students' pre-conceived notion about their place in the class

Summative Assessment

- Convey joy and optimism when discussing learning and assessment.
- Understand the difference between work and learning.
- Put summative assessment in its place. It is a moment in time. Be prepared to triangulate in order to make a professional judgment.
- Make sure students are ready. Ensure the summative reflects formative learning and assessment processes.
- Separate behavior and achievement.
- Be prepared for new learning which will require re-demonstration.
- Allow summative to become formative when new evidence replaces old.
- Foster emotional safety.
- Mix it up and be creative.

Softening the edges may mean shifting...	
Assessment architecture/design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Our deep understanding of learning goals ➤ Our work with learning intentions and formative assessment ➤ Our attention to self-assessment and goal-setting ➤ Our decisions around summative assessment and communication ➤ Our plan to engage learners ➤ Our consideration of validity and reliability
Contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Our consideration of the learning environment ➤ Our consideration of timing ➤ Our use of formative assessment to offer feedback and adjust instruction ➤ The supports we have available before, during and after an assessment experience ➤ How we introduce assessment; the language we use and the values we communicate
How we address learning needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The instruction we provide ➤ The method and content of feedback ➤ The degree to which formative assessment informs our practice and flexible grouping ➤ The degree to which students make decisions and self-assess
How we approach our own assessment decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Our approach and personal understanding ➤ Timing – when assessments are given, when we make time to examine the information ➤ Our process for engaging in assessment ➤ Our reasons for assessing ➤ Our responses to assessment information
How we engage students and families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Our choices around reporting ➤ The degree of clarity and communication we engage in ➤ Our choices regarding symbols we use and systems we utilize to share the learning journey ➤ The validity and reliability of what we share – are we measuring what we need to measure and are we confident in our validation of degrees of learning

Soft Edges: Assessment Type

Specific challenge:

Type of assessment and intended purpose

Current hard edges

Needs of the teacher
Values and beliefs that may be impacting things

Needs of the student
Values and beliefs that may be impacting things

Possible approaches to soften the edges