Softening the Edges of Assessment  
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*As Far As the Eye Can See*  
Canadian Assessment for Learning 2017



**Hard and Soft Edges**

* Emotion indicates hard and soft edges and emotion is connected to our needs
* Assessment is a relationship, so hard and soft edges affect both teachers and students
* We have to recognize hard edges in our assessment practices before we can start to soften them
* Soft edges do not mean everyone feels continuous joy and that there is never a struggle. It means that when we struggle, we do so with optimism; we struggle with the knowledge that we have the resources to overcome what we are currently experiencing.

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| **How to recognize a hard edge** | **How to recognize a soft edge** |
| * 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 | * 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 |

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| **The Commission of the Whole Child (2007)** | **And Also…my additional thoughts** |
| * Intellectually active * Physical, verbally, socially, and academically competent * Empathetic, kind, caring, and fair * Creative and curious * Disciplined, self-directed, and goal-oriented * Free * A critical thinker * Confident * Cared for and valued | * Children are not incomplete. They are complete and changing, just like adults. * All students can learn and all adults can learn. * We show students respect by believing in them and challenging them. We also show respect for adults by believing in them and challenging them. * We show respect for students when we help them build independence and believe they can be independent. * Clarity builds confidence and confidence in learners can be nurtured through choices adults make. * Students are different from each other and this difference is a gift, not a complication. * Learning occurs within tension, risk-taking, and mistake-making, but in an environment where it is safe to experience these things. * Assessment can support hope, efficacy, optimism, and joy. |

**Steps for Softening the Edges of Assessment**

1. Start with an assessment process we currently practice
2. Reflect on the intended needs we are trying to meet (intellectual)
3. Reflect on the additional needs that must be met as human beings (both teachers and learners - emotional, physical, social)
4. Determine the degree to which our assessment process fulfills these needs and if it doesn't which needs are not being met
5. Consider alternatives (reference the learning continuum paradigm and do research when needed)
6. 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.*

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|  | **Scenario One: Homework** | | **Scenario Two: Exam** | |
| **Needs of the teacher** |  | |  | |
| **Needs of the student** |  | |  | |
| **Type of Assessment and Intended Purpose** |  | |  | |
| **Current Hard Edges** |  | |  | |
| **Advice for softening the edges** |  | |  | |
| **Scenario – Self-Assessment** | | | |
| You are inviting students to self-assess and set goals based on a formative assessment you completed two days ago. One of your students approaches you and asks what he is supposed to do because he “got all the answers right.” You aren’t sure how to respond. | | | |
| **Hard Edges for Educators** | | **Softening the Edges for Educators** | |
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| **Hard Edges for Learners** | | **Softening the Edges for Learners** | |
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| **Scenario – Formative, Targeted Response** | | | |
| You are prepared to give a formative quiz that you’ve used before with previous classes. It follows a format you have depended on for some time: Definitions, fill-in-the-blank, short answer and two long answer questions. You’re committed to providing targeted supports for students who are struggling in specific areas but you know your current format is making it difficult to know where to respond. | | | |
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| **Scenario – Summative, Beyond Proficiency** | | | |
| A student in your class has achieved the following grades on her unit tests (based on learning goals): 99, 100, 100, 98, 100 (A+, A+, A+, A+, A+). It is now time for the scheduled final exam. You are trying to decide whether or not this student be required to write it. You wonder, if the student were to write the final, what kinds of prompts/ questions you should ask. | | | |
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| **Scenario – Summative, Pacing** | | | |
| You have just assessed a summative project and you are disappointed to see that 30% of your students have not demonstrated proficiency. You had planned on starting a new unit tomorrow. | | | |
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| **Scenario - Reporting** | | | |
| You are a new teacher and it is time for your first set of parent conferences. You are nervous because a few of your students seemed unhappy with their progress report when it was handed out. You have tried your best to prepare but you dread having to defend your grading system. | | | |
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| **Scenario – Formative/Summative, Re-Demonstration** | | | |
| You believe in offering opportunities to show growth. You replace old evidence with new and are committed to accuracy and reliability in your assessment. You have noticed, lately, that students are approaching their summative events with reduced proficiency. When you ask them about it, they state they did not have time to prepare and plan on doing better when they re-assess. You realize you’re approaching a situation where you will always have to give more than one opportunity to demonstrate learning. You see missed lunch breaks and instructional time in your future. | | | |
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**My Commitment to Soften the Edges**

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| Area of Focus |
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| Why I think the Edges are Hard |
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| My plan to Soften the Edges |
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Resources

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