Reducing the Stress of Assessments

We are in Valencia, Spain at ELMLE, the European League for Middle Level Educators annual conference, to present a workshop on "The High Value of Low-Stakes Assessment." And by we I mean me and my colleague at International School of Amsterdam who, dynamic educator that she is, teaches Dutch to middle schoolers and science to kids in grade ten.

I ask if she will join me because, through our delightful, wonky conversations about teaching and learning, I come to find out that she uses formative assessments—more specifically, practice quizzes—with regularity and, better still, is keeping data on their efficacy. Not to be confused with the altogether unpalatable strategy of ‘teaching to the test,’ such formative assessments ensure that students are aware of what they know and what they do not. We teachers can use this same information to ascertain who can benefit from an extra scoop of instruction, a different point-of-entry, another mode of presentation.

As I mention in our presentation at ELMLE, Benedict Carey’s How We Learn, Henry L. Roediger, et. al.'s Make It Stick and Daniel Willingham's Why Don't Students Like School? form the spine of my argument: that low-stakes assessment increases what our students are able to retain between learning a new topic and the big-ticket assessment at the end of the chapter, unit, investigation, what-have-you. (I have even published a piece in a similar vein.)

While retention is my primary focus, my presentation partner also looks through the lens of stress-reduction; that practice quizzes ultimately lessen the test anxiety of her students so they have a better shot at showing what they know. To that point, on one of the slides she inserts a picture of the top-left corner of a student’s quiz on which is a round-lettered reminder one of her students writes to himself: “Don't Stress Out.”

This got me thinking: what might the affective component of low-stakes assessment mean for our kids?

Learning, as Willingham posits, is hard. Learning something new can make us feel vulnerable, exposed in front of our teacher and peers. Students who might have smaller working memories or slower processing speeds may sense this vulnerability even more. However, when we feel safe in our environment, our frontal lobe is able to access other parts of our brains that can actually assist us in learning. Low-stakes assessments can aid in promoting a feeling of safety because students understand them to be a tool for learning and understanding rather than a means of assessing their abilities.

With more practice (quizzes,) students can grow more comfortable with the process. Ideally, this means that when an actual quiz or test occurs, Chester and Esmerelida will be less anxious about it because on the more formal assessment they would have been exposed to similar questions. In our workshop, an eighth-grade English teacher shared that some of last year’s students pop by her classroom to explain how they’re freaking out about their semester exams because they are in the same DP-style as those given to grade twelvers. While we all understood the teachers’ rationale to “prepare them for the real thing,” we felt that a better approach would be to, in effect,
scaffold the rigour of the exam to more appropriately suit the developmental age of the barely-beyond-middle-school crowd.

Finally, on low- (or even no) stakes assessments, our expeditious feedback helps a student to understand the errors or mistakes she or he made. Rather than leaving that learning in the rearview, kids will have another chance to show what they know. Our charges can fall down, if you will, then pick themselves up and try again. And in so doing, (you know where I'm going with this,) they just might nurture their own growth mindset.

So, what can low-stakes assessment look like?
- “Bell ringers” and “Exit Tickets”: Begin the class with a review of a key concept or two from the previous lesson, have kids swap with a partner, correct them and pass them back. The same can occur as students depart the class, in which case it is the teacher who can see who is understanding and who could benefit from another scoop of instruction.
- “Mad Minute”: an example from our audience in which kids have just sixty seconds to answer two or three questions concerning previous learning.
- Clickers or other online tools that provide swift feedback to both teacher and pupil.
- White boards: Students write a response to a question then hold up the boards so the teacher is able to gauge comprehension.
- More ideas can be found at retrievalpractice.org, for example.

What a treat to work for these past few months side-by-side with my fellow faculty toward sharing our understandings of the value of low-stakes assessment. And I am equally pleased to learn that these formative assessments can raise our capacity to remember as they concomitantly lower our anxiety of examinations.

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