Handout: Considerations for Interpreting Student Work for Learning and Equity

This handout summarizes the information covered in the narrated presentation from Module 6, Activity 2.

Prioritize Learning

When we prioritize learning in our interpretation and response to evidence of learning, we do so with the purpose of supporting the student so they may advance their own learning. Prioritizing learning requires the mindset that learning is not fixed or binary and requires consideration of motivation, trust, and identity (Black & Wiliam, 1998, pp. 7–74; McMillan & Moore, 2020, pp. 85–92).

Focus on Student Assets

When teachers focus on student assets in the process of interpreting student evidence, they take a strengths-based approach to how they interpret student work and how they communicate with students about their learning. Instead of focusing on what students have missed or done wrong, they identify what students have demonstrated about what they know and can do and use that as the basis for next steps. It also recognizes the full range of experiential, linguistic, cultural, and personal assets when they share their learning (Flint & Jaggers, 2021, pp. 254–264).

Be Intentional About Focus and Purpose

When analyzing evidence of learning, it's easy for our attention to be pulled in many different directions. It makes sense because, after all, learning is messy and complicated. However, the most effective and equitable analyses of, and responses to, evidence of student learning are intentional about focus and purpose. For example, if an assignment is based on a claim about students' capacity to both use and elaborate upon evidence in an argumentative essay, it may not make sense to invest a lot of energy in correcting grammar mistakes in students' writing. This is not to say that a claim cannot focus on more than one skill at a time, or that it is not worthwhile to provide feedback to students on something you notice is not aligned to your

claim, but simply that it is good practice to use your claim to be intentional about your interpretation and response (Popham, 2019).

Examine Biases

We all bring our own biases and preferences to the analysis of evidence of student learning. We have ideas about what learning should look like and how it should be expressed. These biases are informed by our own experience as learners, messages transmitted through dominant cultural norms, and our own training and experiences in the classroom. Without examining these biases and reflecting on the ways they may limit students sharing what they know and can do, we risk inaccurate analyses of student learning and harming students. For example, teachers may have an internalized bias about the general distribution of high, medium, and low performance across a class. Without examining these biases, teachers may miss opportunities to recognize learning that does not correspond to this perceived distribution. Working collaboratively with colleagues to examine student work from other classrooms and surfacing and discussing different ways that students demonstrate their learning can help challenge these biases and create more fairness (Reibel, 2021; Fergus, 2017).

Be Transparent to Students

Students should have a clear understanding of the purpose of any assessment and how it will be evaluated. They should understand how the assessment connects to the learning they have already experienced as well as its relationship to their upcoming learning. When students feel that an assessment is disconnected from their learning and the feedback or grades received on their work is arbitrary, then they can become disengaged from the assessment process and even from learning itself. Making the interpretation of student work and how you will respond to it transparent to students is an important way to foster student agency and ensure that students benefit from their assessment experiences. Students should have the opportunity to engage with rubrics, interpretation, and scoring tools before they undertake an assessment activity (Marzano et al., 2001; McMillan & Moore, 2020, pp. 85–92).

Maximize Ways Students Can Represent Knowledge

At one time or another, we have all been surprised by the novel ways that students expressed ideas, solved problems, or demonstrated interesting thinking. When our analysis tools are narrowly focused in terms of the modes in which students can represent their knowledge and

skills, we may limit our ability to recognize learning, even when it is aligned to a claim. In order to effectively create space for students to represent evidence of their learning in a variety of ways, it is important to be very clear about your claim. Defining your claim clearly will allow you to identify where you can offer student choice while still eliciting valid evidence. For example, if your claim is focused on a conceptual understanding, could students choose to represent their idea in writing, verbally, or by drawing a model and still provide valid evidence (CAST, 2018)?

Apply Consistently

When students provide evidence of their learning, the interpretation of student work should be fair. Students should feel confident that feedback and grades or scores will be applied consistently. In the use of tools, like scoring guides and rubrics, it is important to ensure that the interpretation and response to student work is both consistent and aligned to the claim. However, rubrics by themselves do not ensure consistency. Rubrics best support consistent analysis and response to student work when teachers work together to apply a rubric and discuss their analysis with colleagues, reaching consensus about how to use the rubric to analyze student work. This process is called calibration, and we will offer more details about this later in the module (Popham, 1997; University of Minnesota, 2021).

Embrace Improvement

Any assessment can be improved and the process of interpreting evidence of student learning can surface new ideas about an assessment tool or strategy. Student responses can showcase whether the prompt was vague or included words that were unfamiliar to the students. It can reveal ways that your scoring tool did not account for different scenarios, like ways of demonstrating emerging understanding or providing an answer that is technically correct but unintended. Embracing improvement means being open to learning from your analysis of student work and using what you learn to refine the assessment tool or strategy, including the method of analysis and to adjust instruction (Popham, 2019).

References

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