

“Assumicide” (Assumptions that kill learning)

By Bambi Betts

Like all human endeavors, schools are based on a set of defining premises that drive day-to-day practice. As schools are about the business of learning, naturally the most critical premises are about teaching and learning. And if these premises are “assumptions” rather than a correct understanding of learning, we are in trouble.

Nothing can shut down learning faster than a faulty assumption. We commit real “assumicide” when assumptions go unchallenged or, worse, when they become the heart of actual practice.

Any endeavor worthy of the title “profession” regularly does the often uncomfortable work of monitoring these assumptions, most obviously through looking at practice. In our international schools, with the coming and going of teachers and leaders from around the world, this is even more essential.

Amongst the most common instances of “assumicide” are:

Assumption #1: The more I talk, the more they will learn.

Study after study has established that “substantive conversation,” (e.g., F. Newmann) and active verbal engagement on the part of students are directly correlated to improved achievement. All learners, kids and adults alike learn more effectively when they have ample opportunity to ask questions, to verbally “try on” the new learning.

Some do this naturally, others need more structured practice. Unfortunately, teacher talk still dominates too many classrooms. When we assume TEACHING=LEARNING, at best we dilute learning and at worst we kill it.

Assumption #2: Surely someone else has already taught this to these kids. It’s not my job.

The lack of a coherent, well-articulated curriculum has led many a teacher to assume that “it is not MY job to teach them that.” They should already know it, understand it or be able to do it. A very disturbing recent example comes from a federal study just released by the National Center for Education Statistics in the US. The study found that the reading proficiency of university graduates in the United States has declined dramatically in the eleven-year period between 1992 and 2003. Did each subsequent teacher “assume” that some previous teacher had ensured these students had learned?

Assumption # 3: Assigning work is the same as teaching.

As we examine classroom practice around the world we see that there is clearly confusion about the difference between TEACHING someone something and simply asking them to do it. While some learning may take place from the doing, it will be random at best and could lead to the wrong learning.

Take writing for example. We may assume that if we just assign writing more frequently, students will get better at it.

Not so. It is entirely possible for 15 writing experiences to actually be the same writing experience 15 times. While the doing is clearly essential to the task of learning to write, it is possible to continue to write poorly without specific teaching. Just asking kids to do tasks will not automatically lead to learning.

Assumption # 4: All teachers know how to write effective curriculum.

This one is really impacting us in international schools. The national systems from which international school teachers are drawn, for the most part, DO NOT include curriculum development as part of the teacher preparation. There is an assumption in most systems that WHAT students will learn is already pre-determined by some entity (national standards, state standards, a national curriculum). So the focus in teacher preparation can be on HOW to teach and hopefully how best to gather evidence of learning,

In most international schools, however, teachers are routinely asked to actually determine what's worth learning in their area. School leaders routinely assume that teachers have expertise in this. The results of this assumption can range from randomly brilliant to mediocre compliance, or to downright antiquated, misleading curriculum.

Assumption # 5: Most learning can be assessed through traditional, "school box" instruments.

Those who have read TIE for sometime will know that PTC and TTC have made the dissolution of this assumption a top priority for over a decade now. The cases of assumicide here are devastating to learning.

The mismatch between what we claim we want students to learn, and the tools we use to collect and evaluate evidence of that learning are at the heart of many ineffective practices. If I use the wrong assessment tool, then all my teaching choices from that point forward are potentially based on skewed learning evidence.

It is alarming that our notion of teaching for understanding has expanded; yet we continue to defend decontextualized assessment tools as valid and reliable evidence of deep understanding.

Replacing these assumptions with more precise knowledge is an excellent starting point for real and practical school improvement. But lest we assume that it ends there, in a future issue we will examine some of the killing assumptions made at the school leadership level.