

Kraskin Invitational Skeffington Symposium On Vision

January 16-18, 2010

Don't Leave Your Assumptions At The Door

Steve Gallop, O.D.

Assumptions are concepts, notions and ideas that we easily and often forget are there; underlying the things we do all day, every day. According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, an assumption is "a fact or statement (as a proposition, axiom, postulate, or notion) taken for granted." I was somewhat surprised to see the word 'fact' in there but we'll leave that for another time. Too often today's fact is tomorrow's punch line. As Bob Kraskin was fond of saying, there are damn few facts in this world; there are many concepts, notions and ideas, but damn few facts. I have always assumed he was correct in this.

The trigger for this topic was an on-line discussion among behavioral optometrists about plus at near. Some expressed concern about what they perceived as the frivolous use of plus at near in the very young and the 'fact' that there was no proof that it should have any significant impact on performance of near tasks, unless we are talking about accommodative issues like hyperopia or esotropia or late-stage presbyopia. This is a common perception even within our ranks. One person trying his best to create common ground was Greg Kitchener, saying the idea that plano is the expected and appropriate lens for near tasks for those younger than forty is nothing more than an assumption: A very convenient assumption since we are born without glasses and most appear perfectly capable of sustained near work sans lenses, but an assumption nonetheless. We are all born without coats on and most of us with very little fur, but most seem quite comfortable and happy donning warm outer wear this time of year.

Greg explained that he began with a different assumption: That is, plus for near being the expected, not plano. He labeled both as assumptions thereby putting them on an equal footing, which to me was a rational starting point. There remains no research, let alone proof that plano at near is optimal. I believe the major difference in these two assumptions is that those who customarily prescribe plus for near tasks have some experience comparing the two assumptions.

This made me wonder what other assumptions might be lurking, unnoticed in my own thinking and how they influence, for better or worse, my overall approach as well as my interactions with any given individual. For example, how often do I assume I am understanding what a person is telling me when in fact what I think I understand has more to do with what's going on in MY head than in theirs? We all function with filters that color the way we think, feel and see. How many times do we try something new that works and then we assume it will work in every seemingly similar situation?

Assumptions are not inherently bad. The trick is to identify our assumptions and optimally those of others with whom we intermingle. It behooves us to recognize them for what they are, and to utilize them to stimulate our creativity without allowing them to become stale. Stale assumptions tend to restrict our personal and professional development and our ability to provide the most appropriate care for each individual with whom we interact. Continued growth and development are the expected. Stale assumptions are the enemy of growth and development.

We function utilizing many assumptions. We assume the sun will rise tomorrow. This cannot be known for an absolute fact although admittedly there is an impressive body of scientific

work lending this assumption tremendous weight, as well as a huge body of practical, everyday experience. However, tomorrow's rising of the sun cannot be proven until it has already occurred. Of course, if it doesn't rise tomorrow, I assume the question will be moot.

Assumptions generally have gotten a bad rap. In fact they are necessary for purposeful action. We must have either prior knowledge of the nature and outcome of an action or some sense of the possibilities that may be available as a result of that action. We begin by assuming an action we wish to carry out will have the same or similar results as it did the previous time or times. We would be less likely to act if we could not assume this. Fortunately we are able to make adjustments as the act is carried out and doesn't go exactly as we assumed, but the initial assumption was important to provide the base, the confidence and perhaps the template for action. Then of course we assume that the adjustment we make will improve the chances of a desired outcome.

A similar process occurs in science. First is the assumption, then the hypothesis, followed by very careful and serious research, leading unerringly to a fact or statistic. A statistic is nothing more than a glamorous assumption, an assumption with excellent breeding and designer clothes, but an assumption nonetheless. My motto has been: When faced with any given individual, statistics are, at best, useless. Statistics can and often do obscure the reality of a given situation.

Optometry is a science. Research abounds, both from within and from outside our profession. There is concrete evidence of the neuro-anatomy whence the visual process emerges and functions. There is also evidence of much more than the primary visual pathway from retina to visual cortex. Though we like to think our philosophy, our model-of-vision and all that we do as clinicians is based on hard science, a healthy academic background and our clinical experience, assumptions abound. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

Some general assumptions that emerge from the typical optometric education are:

- Glasses are at best a necessary evil prescribed to correct a defect – refractive error, strabismus, presbyopia
- We treat diagnoses and symptoms
- Maximum acuity equals optimum performance
- Nearsightedness is genetic and immutable
- VT is not part of primary care

Assumptions more common among developmentally oriented optometrists include:

- The visual process is pervasive in human behavior and development
- The primary purpose of the visual process is to direct action
- Continual growth and development are expected
- Everyone can benefit from VT
- Patients want to be active participants in their care
- Lenses can be used to alter stress and to guide and facilitate development
- Refractive conditions develop as part of the process of coming to balance with the task

Each assumption can be beneficial or detrimental depending on the context within which the assumption is applied. For example, I assume open-ended questions to be of great value in drawing a person out. This could be disastrous in a high-volume setting where patients need to be cycled through quickly. Similarly, I want to work with people who are interested in being active participants in their care, who understand that the final prescription is more a negotiation between doctor and patient than a sentence handed down from a higher

authority. I assume this is why people come to my office as opposed to all the other ODs in my neighborhood.

I'm suggesting that much of what we rely on every day in practice is based on assumption. I assume some will hear in this a negative connotation. It is not meant as such. Hopefully, as developmental optometrists we do assume that the visual process is pervasive in human behavior and that the primary purpose of the visual process is to direct action, or something along those lines. I suspect we also assume that visual training can benefit most if not all human beings because change and growth are expected. These are assumptions. They cannot really be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt except maybe after the fact. But these are the ideas that spur us on in the face of the myriad complaints for which people seek our help.

I assume that I can help just about everyone who comes through my door...until they come through my door. At that moment I realize the person in front of me is unlike any other I have ever met. Then I set out to do everything in my power to help them get what they need from what I have to offer.

I guess what I'm saying is don't leave your assumptions at the door. Keep them where you can see them and use them to your best advantage. Don't let them become a ball and chain that ends up weighing you down at just the moment you need to have the greatest freedom of choice and movement. With the kind of amazing work we do who knows how we will end up?

Some of my favorite assumption-busting reminders are:

In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind there are few.
Shunryu Suzuki

The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth. Niels Bohr