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Understanding and using assessment and delivering feedback

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Chapter 13 – Using Assessment and Delivering Feedback

Q11 Know the assessment requirements and arrangements for the subjects/curriculum areas they are trained to teach, including those relating to public examinations and qualifications.

Q12 Know a range of approaches to assessment, including the importance of formative assessment.

Q26(a) Make effective use of a range of assessment, monitoring and recording strategies.

Q26(b) Assess the learning needs of those they teach in order to set challenging learning objectives.

Q27 Provide timely, accurate and constructive feedback on learners' attainment, progress and areas for development.

Q28 Support and guide learners to reflect on their learning, identify the progress they have made and identify their emerging learning needs.

Introduction

As a teacher, you will be expected to assess pupils' work and feedback the results of this assessment to help them to develop, you will also need to use assessment to feed forward into your planning. This is a skill that has to be learned. Teachers tend to be rated highly on general professional knowledge and planning but they do not always make effective use of assessment (Ofsted Annual Reports, cited in Stanley, 2007). For teacher trainees, it is perhaps understandable that specific provision for assessment may be left out initially as concerns about presentation of subject content and classroom management can be more pressing. But to become a good teacher you will need to be aware of the importance of assessment for public accountability and will need to understand how assessment can significantly improve teaching and learning. You will assess pupils both during and after learning. These assessments are usually called Assessment for Learning (AfL) or formative assessment, and Assessment of Learning (AoL) or summative assessment. However, 'Assessments in themselves are not inherently formative or summative – it is the process and how the information is used that is important' (DfES, 2004, p17).

Assessment for learning

"Assessment for Learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how to get there"

Assessment Reform Group (2002, p2)

Assessment for Learning (AfL) or formative assessment is one of the most powerful ways of promoting improved learning. It is central to more effective classroom practice as it can improve the focus and pace of teaching and enhance pupils' learning significantly (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Assessment Reform Group, 1999).

Every interaction with a pupil is an opportunity for AfL, and it is embedded in the ongoing dialogue between teacher and pupil that informs and develops teaching and learning. At its most informal this could be a conversation between a teacher and a pupil that leads to the teacher identifying what the pupil does or does not understand. The teacher will give feedback to the pupil that acknowledges and praises what is understood and use the conversation to help them to overcome misconceptions so that more effective learning takes place. You now have information about the success (or otherwise) of your teaching plans and strategies in relation to the specific pupil, and can investigate whether the misconceptions identified are more widespread. You can use this to re-shape and re-focus teaching so that other pupils are helped to overcome the misconceptions.

From the pupil's perspective, the quality of the teacher's feedback is most important, as knowing what is fully understood and what is less secure, helps learners concentrate their efforts. From the teacher's perspective, it is the re-shaping and re-focusing of teaching that is important as this can increase the pace of learning for more pupils.

AfL Strategies

There are a wide variety of AfL strategies that you can use (DfES, 2004). These will vary considerably from subject to subject and in their formality and the general applicability of the information they yield. Informal dialogue with individual pupils and the class, and formal end of unit written tests are the extremes of formality in the continuum of assessment strategies. Some of the strategies you might employ to find out whether each pupil in a class understands, are:

- Have a one-to-one conversation with each child. This provides very specific opportunities to redirect an individual pupils' learning but is less efficient than talking to the whole class.
- Ask the whole class a question and judge their response, for example, by requiring pupils to raise their hands if they know the answer. The proportion of the class responding gives a broad indication of the extent of understanding. Teaching can be modified immediately building on pupils' answers.
- Ask the whole class a question and choose a particular pupil of known ability to answer it. If the pupil is generally slow to understand, an accurate response gives a broad indication that the class understands; if the pupil is generally quick to understand, an inaccurate response gives a broad indication that the class does not understand.
- Quickly circulate and note whether each pupil has done a specific task correctly. This provides information about the progress of the class and may lead to an immediate review with the whole class, a group of pupils or individuals. Acknowledging each pupil's efforts as the teacher circulates and checks work can help build confidence and engagement and re-focus learning.
- Devise a short oral quiz that covers the learning objectives of the lesson and ask pupils to write down their answers. Mark this quickly in class (probably self or peer assessment – see below). Ask pupils to raise their hands if they, for example, gave the correct answer for four out of five questions. If all the class raise their hands, this can be taken as a broad indication that the lesson has been successful, and vice versa.
- Set homework so that pupils can independently and individually demonstrate that they have understood the lesson. When you mark the homework,

diagnostic comments and grades or marks will help pupils understand the progress they have made and the standard achieved. However, it is important to take into account that: pupils may have had help doing homework; pupils may copy others' work; and homework may not be well supported by parents or not done. These factors affect the reliability of homework as a tool for assessing the progress of individual pupils and the class.

- Ask pupils to produce a piece of work at the end of a task to demonstrate what they have done; or set a short test or a formal end of topic assessment. Mark this yourself and make sure that the feedback pupils receive includes a grade or mark and a written commentary on the strengths and weaknesses of their work and how they can improve it. The grade is important to pupils who want to do well; they will compete with each other to achieve the highest grade. Some pupils may apparently ignore the written feedback which has taken you considerable time and effort to produce, and this can be frustrating. However, this written feedback is central to the learning process and should not be omitted. It will be helpful to all pupils but can be particularly helpful to those of lower ability.

Thought (1)

When teachers return marked work, pupils often appear to be very interested in the grade or mark awarded but may show little interest in the teacher's diagnostic comments that are essential to help them improve their work.

Why are some pupils more interested in the grade or mark they receive than in the diagnostic comments that will help them improve?

How can teachers encourage pupils to carefully consider the diagnostic comments?

Self and peer assessment

You should build into your planning opportunities for self and peer assessment and explain to pupils why they need to do this. As with other aspects of assessment, pupils are likely to perform better at self and peer assessment if they know why they are doing it, and recognise its advantages and disadvantages.

Self assessment helps pupils develop their ability to learn and it is 'necessary for effective learning' (Boud, 1995, p14). 'Pupils are more likely to make rapid progress in their learning if they understand what they are aiming for' (DfES, 2004, p10), and learning can be more effective when learners are able to identify for themselves what they understand and what they do not understand, as this enables them to learn independently without feedback from the teacher. If pupils are not engaged in self assessment, the effect 'is to remove them from participation in the core processes of learning' (Boud, 1995, p12). 'This can lead to disengagement with the learning process and sometimes to poor behaviour' (DfES, 2004, p1).

Pupils develop confidence in what they know through self assessment, and can focus their learning more accurately. This form of assessment also enables pupils to learn more quickly and efficiently. Prompt feedback on success helps shape learning more quickly so that understanding of concepts can be adjusted whilst the pupil is engaged with tasks. Delays mean that the tasks and the assessment may not be well remembered. Immediate feedback is intrinsic in self assessment.

Peer assessment helps pupils increase their understanding of the assessment process and improve their self assessment. It is difficult to assess one's own work accurately; however, in order to make progress with learning, it is important to learn to do this (Boud, 1995). Robust discussion with other pupils about the quality of their work can help them to discover the strengths and weaknesses of their own work. Assessing others' work helps pupils view their own work more objectively and assess its worth more accurately.

Even so, teachers need to be aware of the disadvantages of self and peer assessment. Self assessment may be inaccurate (Rees and Shepherd, 2005), and learners may overestimate their own abilities or be unrealistic about their potential achievements. They may also underestimate what they can do and become downhearted and discouraged. Peer assessment should lead to robust discussion between pupils but can lead to inaccurate assessments (Platt, 2002) and mutual hostility if pupils resent criticism. A more dominant pupil may persuade other pupils that their good work is of a lower quality. You will need to manage carefully self and peer assessment to minimise any downside.

Thought (2)

AfL is a powerful technique for improving the focus and pace of teaching and learning. AoL is a snapshot of a pupil's achievement.

Is assessment either formative or summative or can it be both?

Key areas

All assessment must be fair and reasonable. You should encourage pupils to check and challenge your assessments so that they become more engaged with and have a greater understanding of the assessment process. For example, when returning marked work, you could give pupils a copy of the mark scheme you used. If assessment is open and well understood, pupils will know that they have been assessed fairly and that there is no favouritism on the part of the teacher. You will soon discover that young people have a very well developed sense of justice and respond positively to fair treatment. In addition, this approach can help pupils develop a greater understanding of the topic.

Assessment results need be recorded so that you can monitor participation and actual performance relative to expectations. At a minimum, you should note whether pupils have completed homework and other set work, and to what standard. After each formal assessment, you should record a grade or mark for each pupil. It is also useful to record a comment that characterises each pupil's progress, in preparation for parent-teacher consultation and written reporting to parents. There is government and commercial software to support the recording of assessment results; for example, the DfES pupil achievement tracker (2007) and the Primary Progress Toolkit (2007).

Any assessment impacts on pupils' willingness to learn, so you need to look at how you can use assessment as a vehicle for motivation. Pupils who are more enthusiastic and engaged achieve better than those who are not. You will need to differentiate between pupils but this should be done in ways that encourage pupils to persist with their studies. An assessment designed so that all pupils achieve between 50% and 90% success will have a more positive effect on motivation than a test

where all pupils achieve between 10% and 50%, even though the range of marks is the same.

Assessment of Learning

Assessment of Learning (AoL) or summative assessment is a snapshot of achievement, and 'tends to be carried out periodically, e.g. at the end of a unit or term, year or key stage' (DfES, 2004, p17). As teachers we are familiar with this type of assessment as it is how we have ourselves been assessed. Public examinations such as GCSE, A Level and degree examinations are all summative. The outcome of AoL is usually reported as a grade or level which is intended to summarise a level of achievement. A detailed description of what a pupil is expected to have done to achieve a particular grade or level is often available; for example, GCSE specifications include grade descriptions and there are level descriptions for National Curriculum subjects.

External assessment

AoL at the end of a module or course is often external assessment, that is, the tasks set and the marking of these is done by an organisation external to the educational institution attended by the pupil. Well known examples are the end of key stage tests in English, Mathematics and Science, and GCSE, AS and A- levels which are set by the three major English awarding bodies of AQA, Edexcel and OCR. For more information on awarding bodies, browse their websites (see the Key Reading section). Although these awarding bodies are large, they do not have a monopoly. There are hundreds of awarding bodies in the UK, ranging from the specialist (banking, accounting, sports coaching) to the more general.

External AoL helps further or higher education institutions and employers summarise the individual achievement of prospective students and employees, and enables them to choose the best students and employees.

Thought (3)

- Grade and level descriptions attempt to characterise the achievements of pupils who are awarded a particular grade or level. However, they do not describe the achievement of a particular pupil.
- Grades and levels tend to be very broad. For example, a very good grade D in GCSE Mathematics may differ only very slightly from a very weak grade C.

How useful are grade and level descriptions in helping pupils and teachers plan future learning and employers in deciding who to employ?

League tables

Statistics summarising the achievements of pupils attending a particular school are publicly available and these are used in compiling school league tables. As a result, parents have information about schools that could help them choose a school for their children, and schools are publicly accountable for the progress of their pupils. This is designed to stimulate competition between schools and drive up the quality of education.

Resources

Government does not directly fund awarding bodies. When schools and colleges enter pupils and students for an external assessment, for example, GCSE, a fee is paid to the awarding body. As a result, awarding bodies compete for pupils and strive to offer the best service to schools and colleges and their websites have a wide range of useful resources for teachers and pupils. For example, for GCSE there could be:

- a specification that clarifies exactly what should be studied and how it will be assessed;
- specimen or previous examination papers;
- marked examples of coursework;
- advice on how to prepare for the examination;
- reports that identify the areas where pupils have been successful or less successful in the assessments;
- statistics showing how many pupils achieved a particular grade and the standard required to achieve it.

The resources available from the awarding bodies can be very useful when planning teaching. They describe the knowledge, skills and understanding that will be assessed, and can help teachers identify topics that pupils in general find difficult, so that teaching can be planned to include these. Specimen or previous examination papers with answers and marked examples of coursework can be helpful when teachers prepare summative assessment for use in schools and colleges. (If using past papers for your own tests, remember that pupils and parents also have access to the awarding body websites!)

Similarly, there are useful resources on the National Curriculum in Action website (see Key Reading). There is helpful advice to support teachers assessing the level of their pupils' work, and a particularly useful feature is the embedded hyperlinks in the level descriptions that link to examples of pupils' work at that level.

Awarding bodies are using ICT to improve efficiency and lower costs. For example, they are developing on line, on demand tests with immediate feedback on performance, and e-portfolios so that pupils' coursework can be submitted for assessment in electronic form. They have changed the way paper based examination scripts are marked: these may be scanned, distributed to examiners over the Internet and marked on line, as this is more accurate and efficient. The detailed results of computer based assessment are more easily recorded using ICT, and more information about the performance of each individual pupil is becoming available. Currently, the feedback each pupil receives can be only a grade or level but it is likely that in the very near future each pupil will receive personalised and detailed feedback on success in every aspect of an assessment.

School tests and examinations

AoL also takes place in schools when teachers assess their pupils' work. Many schools assess their pupils every year, often using assessment methods similar to those that will be used when pupils are externally assessed. This gives pupils practice with these methods of assessment and often leads to a summative grade or level so that schools can report pupils' attainment to parents. However, because teachers set and mark these assessments, they have access to detailed information

about their pupils' learning and can use this to improve teaching and learning. In this case, summative assessment can also be used for formative assessment. In addition, when personalised and detailed feedback is available from the awarding bodies, it is likely that this will also be used for formative assessment.

Chapter summary

- Assessment for Learning (AfL) or formative assessment helps teachers judge pupils' progress and improve the focus and pace of teaching and learning.
- Every interaction with a pupil is an opportunity for AfL.
- Feedback to pupils should let them know what is understood and what is not so that they gain confidence and can concentrate their efforts to improve.
- Self assessment helps pupils develop the ability to learn independently, and learn more quickly and efficiently.
- Peer assessment helps pupils increase their understanding of the assessment process and improve their self assessment.
- Teachers need to be aware of the negative consequences of self and peer assessment, and carefully manage these.
- Assessment of Learning (AoL) or summative assessment is a snapshot of what pupils have achieved. It is often external assessment, for example, GCSE, and is important for public accountability.

Key Reading

- A concise summary of the principles of Assessment for Learning: Assessment Reform Group (2002) *Assessment for Learning: 10 principles to guide classroom practice*. Assessment Reform Group.
<http://www.assessment-reform-group.org.uk> (accessed 10/10/7)
- An extensive review of the practice of Assessment for Learning: DfES (2004) *Pedagogy and Practice: Unit 12: Assessment for Learning*. London: DfES.
- The content and assessment of the National Curriculum in most subjects, with examples of pupils' work at each level of the relevant Attainment Target: The National Curriculum in Action website. <http://www.ncaction.org.uk/> (accessed 10/10/7)
- Awarding Body websites where you can download external assessment specifications and supporting resources:
 - AQA - www.aqa.org.uk (accessed 10/10/7)
 - Edexcel - www.edexcel.org.uk (accessed 10/10/7)
 - OCR - www.ocr.org.uk (accessed 10/10/7)

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www.c-sap.bham.ac.uk/resources/project_reports/findings/ShowFinding.htm?id=Platt/1

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Application to teaching

The purpose of the exercise is to emphasise that pupils' achievements in assessed work can be improved by ensuring they understand what they are required to do and know the criteria that will be used to assess their work. The clapping exercise is subject neutral so can be used to reinforce assessment in any subject.

The exercise works best with a group of around 15 to 30 pupils in an informal session.

- Ask for 3 volunteers. Don't explain what they are volunteering for. Foster a sense of relaxed excitement, anticipation and good humour throughout.
- Ask the volunteers to stand at the front facing the class.
- Explain that the teacher is going to set a task for the volunteers and that the rest of the group will be asked to assess them and write down their assessment without conferring with other pupils.
- Describe the task briefly: Each volunteer will clap their hands for 1 minute.
- The volunteers do this in turn. The teacher should time each volunteer and allow a short period of time for the class to write down their assessment.
- When all the volunteers have completed the task, they remain at the front of the class, and the teacher asks the pupils to consider which volunteer is best at performing the task.
- Ask the class to vote for each volunteer in turn with a show of hands.
- Ask pupils for explanations of their judgements. For each volunteer, chose at least one pupil who believed the volunteer was the best.
- Discuss the exercise with the class. Note that when the assessment took place, the volunteers had: no prior knowledge of the task and did not know the criteria that would be used to assess them. During the discussion, derive criteria for

assessing the task; for example: variation in rhythm; variation in volume; movement and dance; and audience participation and engagement.

- Ask each volunteer to repeat the task but for 30 seconds only.
 - The volunteers' performances are usually much improved.
 - Summarise: improvement can only be due to prior knowledge of the task and how it will be assessed.
-

Individual reflection

Think about a lesson you planned and taught recently and how you planned for and used AfL within the lesson.

- Did the AfL cover the learning objectives and the topics you had taught?
 - Did the lesson plan indicate specific opportunities for AfL?
 - Did you incorporate self and peer assessment and explain why?
 - Was assessment fair and reasonable? Did you encourage pupils to judge this for themselves?
 - Did you modify your teaching and future lesson plans as a result of the assessment?
-

Group exercise

Whatever style of assessment is being used, in practice there are some common issues that should be considered and some questions that you will need to ask when planning assessment.

- What? Is it clear what is being assessed? Both pupils and teachers should know before and during the assessment exactly what will be assessed. Look at your lesson plan and decide whether the assessment is relevant and valid. Assessment should focus on the intended topics. For example, the AfL planned within a lesson should focus on the learning objectives that you have written for the lesson.
- How? Is the assessment feasible? The precise details of how the assessment will be carried out and marked should be decided in advance. This will help ensure that all the tasks can be done; that they can be done in the time available; and that marking is fair and consistent.
- When? When will assessment take place? It should be clear in your planning at what points pupils will be assessed. For example, lesson plans need to include explicit planning for AfL, and pupils should be given ample warning of important AoL events, such as end of unit tests.

Look at a series of four lesson plans of people in your group and see where they have included assessment opportunities. Suggest other places where you would have included assessment. Make sure that you are not only providing opportunities for assessment, but also opportunities for feeding back the results and for feeding the information forward into future lesson plans.