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Gallagher, Hugh (2010) *Assessment in Scotland*. Classroom : the magazine of the National Association for the Teaching of English (11). pp. 34-36.

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Assessment in Scotland

by Linda Harris, Hugh Gallagher,
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As the latest canon rumblings from the SATs wars drift across the border and through the volcanic ash, it may bemuse some colleagues to discover that here too, in a relatively benign assessment environment, teachers of English have the scent of battle in their nostrils. Our new curriculum framework, Curriculum for Excellence (2004), is beginning to unfold or unravel, depending on your perspective; it still promises much that is desirable, but the fact that assessment remains rather vague is seen by some as threatening a successful launch.

Underpinning all current thinking in Scottish education is the 'Assessment is for Learning' programme, implemented here by 'Learning and Teaching Scotland' in 2002. What began as a tender sapling is now a burgeoning healthy plant, in part owing to the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence; of course, it is a well-established shrub in England too. Both the new Curriculum and the AifL Programme, designed for the primary and secondary sectors alike, align themselves firmly with the 'child at the centre' philosophy and are, therefore, rooted in the same soil. Curriculum for Excellence advocates the holistic development of the child into 'responsible citizen' fit for the 21st Century, while AifL propels the child into a bright, new future in which she is actually given responsibility for her own learning. These concepts are not exactly original, but isn't it the case that some of our less enlightened colleagues need a refresher?

'...quote here, quote here, quote...'

There are three 'prongs' to the AifL programme: namely Assessment **for** Learning, Assessment **as** Learning and Assessment **of** Learning. Incidentally, these three areas are portrayed as sides of a triangle in the diagram on the programme's posters. Assessment **for** learning focuses on the next step required in the learning process to assist the learner to progress to the desired target. Yes, this is what good teaching has always been about and we all know that it can be achieved to some extent through sharing criteria with learners, effective questioning and feedback. Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, whose research underpins much of the practical application of the programme, define assessment for learning as 'all those activities undertaken by teachers and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged'. So, scary as it can sometimes be, bald reflection on classroom practice still has an important place.

The second 'prong', Assessment **as** Learning, is about reflecting on the evidence of learning. Pupils and staff set learning targets, share learning intentions and success criteria, and evaluate their learning through self and peer assessment. Through this learners become more aware of what they are learning, what assists them with learning and, most importantly, they become metacognitive – aware of their own knowledge and their ability to understand, control, and manipulate their own learning. Clearly, this is where the 'control freaks' amongst us are going to have to learn to let go.

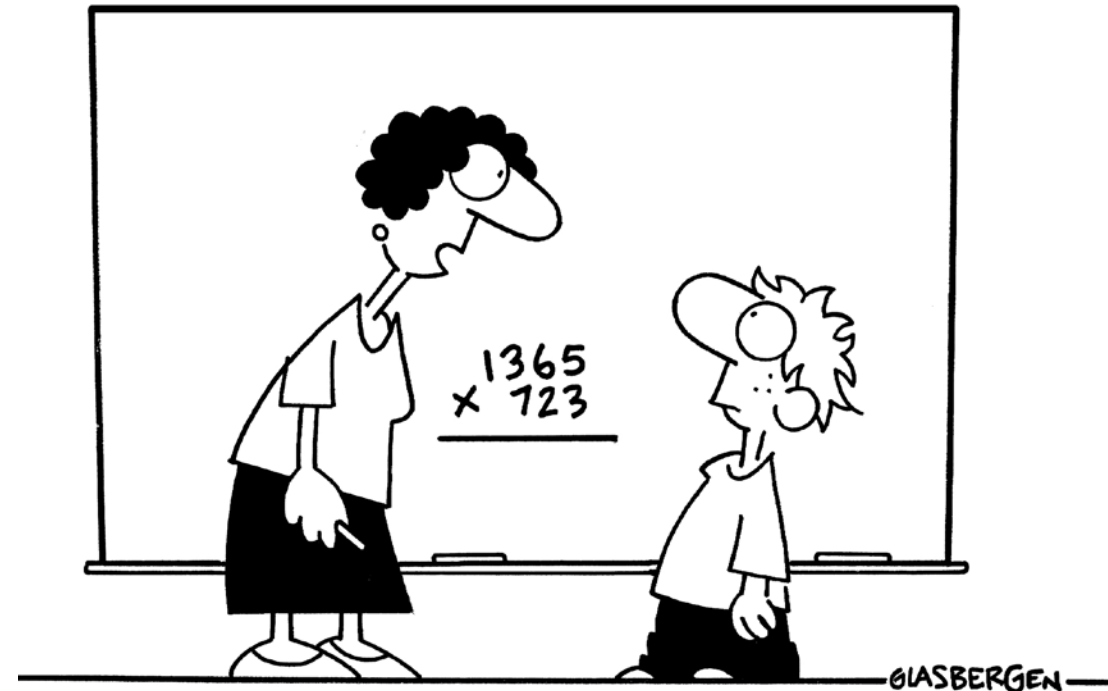
Assessment **of** Learning, the third 'prong', is where teachers and others use a range of evidence to evaluate pupils' progress in a summative way. Judgements about pupils' progress need to be valid, reliable and comparable across classes, schools and sectors. Moderation arrangements should be robust in order to ensure consistency and this is effectively achieved by teachers evaluating the learning and teaching that has occurred and agreeing on appropriate feedback for learners. Back into the comfort zone for our freakishly controlling colleagues.

The tenets of formative assessment are clearly not new and their efficacy has been well documented. Indeed it has been successfully embedded in (some) classroom practice, for many years. However, as with all things, it has revisited us in a slightly different costume and made itself a prominent character in the drama of our new Curriculum. More and more teachers are adopting the techniques to a greater or lesser extent and some are even getting it right!

So much for good, formative assessment practice. What of testing? Teachers in Scotland have long felt that the burden of assessment has weighed heavily and has been a major inhibitor to real learning. Ironically, the evidence does not wholly bear that out. Certainly, the English classroom experiences of many pupils undertaking nationally accredited courses have often been fashioned by the demands of the assessment system. That has not been a universal experience, nor need it have been. Indulge us in a little contextualising.

There is not, nor has there ever been, a national curriculum in Scotland. Although Curriculum for Excellence (hereafter referred to as CfE if you please) provides a framework of curriculum and assessment guidelines designed to nurture youngsters' educational development from 3-18, it is not characterised by the degree of prescription that seems evident when we peer southwards over Hadrian's Wall. Over the decades, that flexibility has led to considerable fragmentation in curriculum

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"Pretend you're starring in a reality show about a kid who can make his dreams come true if he works hard and gets good grades."

delivery and in assessment practice. This was particularly true for the age-group 5-14. Beyond that age, children and young people – CfE's new name for pupils – embarked on courses leading to national qualifications which had an assessment life of their own; for the primary/early secondary cohort, there was simply learning. In the early 1990s, in an attempt to bring some 'coherence and consistency' to this experience, the 5-14 Programme set out age/stage-related attainment targets in Reading, Writing, Talking and Listening. A key, underlying assessment principle of this programme was that teachers' judgements about pupils' progress and attainment were to be trusted, and that teachers would use the targets to support pupils towards desirable levels of achievement. In Language (and Mathematics) these judgements were to be confirmed by National Tests carried out by teachers, taken from a National Assessment Bank. The thinking was sound, even enlightened, with children being tested only when classroom evidence clearly indicated that they had attained the appropriate level. Enter the political quality assurers. As pressure from them built on schools to 'raise standards', the tests that were designed merely to confirm teachers' judgements became drivers of questionable classroom activity and that distortion with which we are all familiar did squeeze effective learning in the English classroom; it had no little effect on fun too!

Meanwhile, youngsters beyond 14 years of age have been able to follow English courses from a suite of National Qualifications that would take far too many words to explain in this overview. The focus on Reading and Writing has been maintained consistently, while Talking has been assessed for

most children up to 15 years old for the past 25 years. Assessment criteria are variously criterion-referenced, outcome-referenced and norm-referenced. Equally as potent ingredients in this assessment brew have been varying measures of internal and external assessment. At one extreme, Standard Grade English – originally designed for all pupils in the 14-16 range – still retains an assessment structure in which Talking is assessed internally, while Reading and Writing are externally examined; even here though, 50% of that assessment is generated internally in the shape of a Folio of work which is sent off for external marking. At the other extreme, the 'gold standard' qualification, Higher English, assesses only Reading and Writing in a combination of internally assessed units and a terminal examination. There are no set texts in our English curriculum; such freedom may seem utopian to some yet, in examination answers on drama texts in the Higher literature paper, a significant majority of the 27000 or so candidates write about one of only three playwrights: Shakespeare, Miller and Williams. And still, Scottish teachers of English feel restricted by assessment arrangements. ▶

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“My term paper is almost finished. I updated my software, defragmented my hard drive, bookmarked an online dictionary, and installed new ink cartridges. Now all I need are some words and a topic!”

Confused? Parents certainly have been. So where will CfE be taking us? In any precise terms, the answer to that question remains something of a mystery. Certainly, the underpinning principles have been disseminated; depending on which online searches you may choose to play with, you could find over 100 pages of principled thinking about the new assessment system. However, to the seeming – and perhaps perplexing – consternation of a significant proportion of the profession, it is clear that teachers’ professional judgements of young people’s progress in English are once more at the heart of the system. The curriculum is presented as a series of Outcomes and Experiences which, by definition, lay out what pupils may be learning in the English classroom and how progression in that learning will manifest itself. Assessment of progress and achievement will be based on teachers’ assessments of their knowledge, skills, attributes and capabilities. It is intended that these judgements will be supported by a robust system of quality assurance and moderation. As part of that, a National Assessment Resource is being established which will be the sole repository for exemplification of standards and assessment resources. Schools and other stakeholders will contribute to the NAR and use it for internal, local and cross-sector moderation and practice sharing activity.

The nebulousness of these plans is understandably unsettling, sufficiently so for audible murmurings of industrial action to be growing ever louder. Nevertheless, some teachers are already working to introduce – or re-introduce – innovative and interesting classroom learning, using their experience of effective formative assessment strategies to support pupils’ progress; others await the details of ‘high-stakes’ qualification assessment arrangements to be announced, perhaps perpetuating the assessment-driven model against which they have railed for so long. Yet,

at least in its rhetoric, CfE offers real scope for the kind of learning and teaching that is, and has been, at the heart of many an English classroom. In its strategic vision for assessment, the Scottish Government states that, ‘Assessment practices will *follow and support* the new curriculum. This will promote higher quality learning and teaching and give more autonomy and professional responsibility to teachers.’ It is perhaps a sign of the corroding effect of league tables and other statistical comparison models, as well as uninformed political notions of the possibility of eternal improvement in examination results, that some teachers see increasing freedom in how pupils are assessed as potentially threatening to them.

In the new system, Literacy will be seen as the responsibility of all teachers. Plans to assess literacy by gathering evidence from across pupils’ learning have been replaced already by a decision to carry that assessment out through English courses, certificated nationally from the end of their third year of secondary education. This decision may resolve some pragmatic problems instantly, but flies in the face of a laudable philosophy which promotes connected learning through genuinely interdisciplinary approaches. Details of the new National Awards system, designed to replace a large chunk of the current assessment architecture, are awaited eagerly.

One thing seems sure; if they want it, teachers of English in Scotland will have freedom to use innovative and supportive strategies to assess pupils. ■

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