



ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING: EMBEDDING AND EXTENDING

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1 INTRODUCTION

Self-assessment by pupils, far from being a luxury, is in fact an essential component of formative assessment.

Inside the Black Box, Black and William

This background paper is not about describing once again functional aspects of assessment for learning. It is not a 'how to do it' guide. Instead, it recognises that many participants are likely to have come to the Assessment is for Learning (AifL) programme through formative assessment and attempts to present a rationale and context in which assessment *for* learning can be both embedded as effective classroom assessment in its own right and also extended to articulate with the other two strands of AifL: assessment as learning and assessment *of* learning.

The transition from formative assessment to personal learning planning in particular has appeared difficult to some. Paul Black and Dylan William have always been quite clear about the central importance of self-assessment in formative assessment. But creating opportunities for pupils to assess themselves may not sit comfortably with a presumption that assessment should be the preserve of teachers, not pupils themselves. The role of the teacher in helping pupils to take greater responsibility for their learning is a theme of what follows.

Another theme is the relationship between formative assessment and local moderation. The interaction between success criteria and evidence of learning provides a link between the two, both for teachers in sharing a standard among themselves and for pupils developing their ability to assess their own progress.

2 COMMON PRINCIPLES

- ***Our classroom assessment involves high quality interactions, based on thoughtful questions, careful listening and reflective responses.***

An AifL school is built on this foundation. The interactions are presented in terms of the kind of communication most likely to promote meaningful learning episodes. Whether they are teachers, pupils or parents, participants can use the ingredients of thoughtful questions, careful listening and reflective responses to engage with one another in ways likely to stimulate learning. Few people would take exception to the statement that learning occurs when those involved are thinking most of the time. The interactions described above are about stimulating this.

Interaction serves to emphasise the classroom climate in which formative assessment can flourish. A traditional view of the role of the teacher as the source of knowledge or skills to be taught to pupils is unlikely to stimulate the active engagement of pupils in their own learning that is needed if formative assessment is to reach its potential.

So far as assessment for learning is concerned, 'thoughtful questions, careful listening and reflective responses' are essential, whether used to clarify prior learning, explore current mis/understandings or guide future improvements. High quality interactions also apply to assessment as and of learning. With a little imagination, it is possible to see how interactions based on these components can support effective exchanges, whether between teachers and pupils in planning personal learning (assessment as learning) or for teachers working with one another to share standards of performance through local moderation (assessment of learning).

2.1 The three strands of AifL

Teachers often dwell on formative assessment as the core of the Assessment is for Learning programme. However, assessment for learning is only one of three programme strands. The other two, assessment as learning and assessment of learning, have equally important roles in providing the broader objective of an assessment system that can meet the needs of everyone involved in the educational process.

If formative assessment is the starting point, wider AifL aims will not be achieved if teachers do not progress to the other strands. If they do not also engage with personal learning planning and local moderation, teachers could also deprive themselves and their pupils of the benefits offered by a more consistent and comprehensive approach to classroom assessment.

Some of the original research reviewed by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam in *Assessment and Classroom Learning* (1998) (the source work for *Inside the Black Box*) illustrates how closely the three strands of AifL are linked. This research proposes a sequence of two actions at the heart of formative assessment. The first is the perception by *the learner* of a gap between a desired goal and her or his present state of knowledge, understanding or skill. The second is the action *the learner* then takes to close that gap.

In assessment for learning (formative assessment), these two actions illuminate what occurs between teachers and pupils to first define and share the learning objective and then offer and use feedback to close the gap; in assessment as learning (personal learning planning), the pupil will identify the desired outcome, while the action needed to close the gap may be proposed and supported in a collaboration between pupil, teacher and parent; in assessment of learning (local moderation), teachers are most likely to have the goal of a shared understanding of the appropriate standard, but pupils, as they assume responsibilities for assessing themselves, will also have an interest in developing a sense of the quality required.

If we can use this model of formative assessment to inform and support how we also set about personal learning planning and standard sharing, we may begin to see how an improved understanding of both the principles and practice of assessment for learning is an effective foundation for developing the other two strands in AifL.

2.2 Formative assessment – a route plan for raising standards

Inside the Black Box provides ample evidence that standards improve if formative assessment is used effectively and consistently. It also shows that there's significant room for improvement in its use. However, if teachers are simply encouraged to build a toolkit of strategies rather than to reflect on the problems the strategies are designed to address, they may not be able to sustain the changes in classroom practice which will eventually produce the tangible benefits promised by formative assessment.

Successful formative assessment depends on different factors. From the outset, pupils need to believe that improvements in their learning are more likely to occur through their efforts than through their ability. The belief that improvement is possible for everyone regardless of ability should underpin every activity designed to harness classroom assessment to raise standards. Teachers have an important role to play in shifting pupils' attention from how clever they are to the effort they're willing to put in.

The active involvement of pupils in their own learning is another essential. Formative assessment can be undervalued and perhaps even misunderstood when it's presented as just good teaching. The real purpose for teachers in improving its use is to give their pupils the capacity to assess themselves more effectively. So, while formative

assessment provides a teacher with a bridge between assessment and teaching, formative assessment is essentially a way of creating independent, reflective learners, who can plan and assess their own progress.

2.3 Making progress with formative assessment

As a first step in their AifL involvement, teachers frequently look for ways to develop their own practice. There is no one way of setting about this but some problems may lie along the road.

One is that the success of assessment for learning is likely to involve teachers' engagement with both the underpinning principles and the practical approaches they can use to develop classroom practice. While some teachers prefer to consider principles before moving to practical activities, many want to start with strategies, which may or may not lead to a greater understanding of the principles and the research findings that inform them.

To overcome some of the disadvantages of this, teachers need time to reflect, by themselves and with others, on the impact of their classroom experiments. Without this, changes in professional practice may be difficult to sustain and there may also be a risk that initial, superficial engagement with strategies are not enriched and embedded through regular exploration and reflection.

Assessment for learning in an AifL school is summed up in the following:

- Our pupils, staff and parents are clear about what is to be learned and what success would be like.
- Our pupils and staff are given timely feedback about the quality of their work and how to make it better.
- Our pupils and staff are fully involved in deciding next steps in their learning and who can help.

The order in which they appear suggests a progression that may also help to stimulate reflection on the connections with both assessment as and assessment of learning. This progression fits well with the model of formative assessment offered above.

3 SETTING AND SHARING LEARNING GOALS

- ***Our pupils, staff and parents are clear about what is to be learned and what success would be like.***

Research suggests that pupils who understand what they are being asked to learn and how they will recognise success are more likely to make learning gains than those who don't. This is particularly true for less able pupils.

These findings may stand in contrast to classroom practice that is more likely to focus pupils' attention on what they are being asked to *do* without offering any information about the underlying purpose.

Two issues arise. The first is that, in planning programmes of work, teachers need to be clear about what they want pupils to learn from the tasks they are set. Learning opportunities are more likely to succeed if pupils have a clear, specific understanding of

what they are learning and curriculum guidelines can often help teachers to clarify the learning they want pupils to focus on.

The second is about the extent to which teachers actually share with pupils and their parents what they are expected to learn from the work they do. Sharing learning objectives or intentions offers pupils an opportunity to become involved in what they are learning through discussing and deciding the criteria for success, which they can then use to identify evidence of improvements.

Information about learning objectives and success criteria needs to be presented in clear, explicit language which pupils can understand. Quite often, messages can be expressed in language that is intelligible to the sender but meaningless to the recipient. Teachers should avoid misunderstandings when sharing with pupils what they are to learn.

In many respects, the real test of a teacher's skills in setting and sharing learning intentions and developing success criteria with pupils will lie in how well pupils can then use similar skills in directing their own learning. Pupils are likely to have started to learn about setting their own goals and monitoring their progress by using learning intentions and success criteria as part of normal classroom activity.

As well as helping pupils to be more involved in their own learning, sharing and using success criteria also provides a link into assessment of learning. If success criteria are used well, they will help pupils to identify evidence to show that they are closing the gap between where they were and where they want to be. Finding consistency in matching evidence of learning with pre-determined success criteria is also important for teachers seeking to share standards through local moderation.

4 CLOSING THE LEARNING GAP

- ***Our pupils and staff are given timely feedback about the quality of their work and how to make it better.***

Feedback is more likely to be used to guide improvements if it can be provided before pupils have moved on to new work. So verbal feedback offered as part of the learning process will probably be more effective. Written feedback – marking – may lose impact because it lacks the immediacy of spoken comments. However, verbal feedback can be demanding and time-consuming. Perhaps these benefits and risks can be reconciled by finding a better balance between written and verbal feedback which brings pupils into the feedback loop as pupil assessors. This would also look forward to self-assessment.

Feedback, whether verbal or written, should be specific and appropriate. If based on a current learning intention and using the related success criteria, it's likely to help pupils focus on closing the gap between where they are now and their desired goal.

Feedback will also encourage pupils to take the action needed to close this gap, if it helps them to see what is good about their current effort before pointing out an area for improvement. This may be one reason why formative assessment appears to hold significant benefits for less able pupils who are less likely to receive favourable comments on their work. On the other hand, always looking for some improvement to be made by even the most able pupil carries the message that improvement is always possible and more likely to come through effort, not ability. Making sure that pupils have classroom time to make the improvement carries a further message that time spent improving work is well spent.

These features of effective feedback are just as important when pupils plan and take forward their own learning. So, once again, the model of feedback the teacher provides is not an end in itself. The real purpose is to help pupils to explore the skills and dispositions they will need to manage their own learning.

5 HELPING PUPILS TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR LEARNING

- ***Our pupils and staff are fully involved in deciding next steps in their learning and who can help.***

Engagement at this level represents the bridge between assessment for learning (formative assessment) and assessment as learning (personal learning planning).

Section 2 described formative assessment as the sequence of two actions: the learner's perception of a gap between the present position and a desired learning goal and what the learner does to close this gap. In Black and Wiliam's description of these actions, the teacher is only referred to as a possible source of the learner's motivating perception. So, it's the learner, not the teacher who is at the centre of the process and the teacher's most important role becomes helping the learner to recognise and interpret the gap and then decide what needs to be done to close it: in making better use of classroom assessment, the teacher is really modelling behaviour that pupils themselves will learn to use in assessing themselves and planning their own learning.

A pupil may reach a learning intention in a single lesson but need several months to achieve an element in a learning plan. Despite this, the perception by the learner of a gap and the action taken to close the gap is as effective a description of personal learning planning as it is of formative assessment and the issues are likely to be the similar.

One of these issues will be closing the gap and who can help the learner do this. This refers back to effective feedback, which assesses the extent to which actions already taken have brought the learner to the desired goal and what still needs to be done. In formative assessment, feedback is likely to come from the teacher, other pupils or the learner: in personal learning planning, the net may be cast wider, involving parents and others.