

Review: Sutton, Ruth (1995), *Assessment For Learning*, Ruth Sutton Publications, Lutterworth – Brian Pickett, Feb 2009

I have read this book from the perspective of a classroom practitioner and a Principal Teacher of Chemistry with responsibility for taking a leading role in the provision of a quality educational experience for young people.

At this particular stage in the evolution of Scottish education I consider this to be a highly relevant text for teachers, school managers and the wider educational audience. Even though it was published in 1995 this text still has currency because it addresses the issues that are important in making assessment integral to the process of learning and teaching in line with the purposes and principles of Curriculum for Excellence. The chapters cover: planning; differentiation; progression; marking; portfolios; standards and standardising and student involvement.

Ruth Sutton discusses issues not only from the perspective of theory but from her own experience as a classroom teacher, a faculty leader and from her experience of observing and working with practitioners. In fact the real strength of this book is that it is not a theoretical treatise on assessment but that it is grounded in the practical. It is concerned with how things can be made to work for the benefit of the learner. There is recognition that there are challenges and it considers strategies to deal with these.

As I read through the book I felt that Ruth Sutton was sitting alongside me engaging me in conversation, asking me questions to help me reflect and focus. The informal language and conversational style make the text very accessible. The use of actual accounts and her 'case studies' helped me to think about how I could put things into practice. There is a tone of realism and empathy when the challenges surrounding some of the issues are discussed. There is a good structure and sequence to this book and the 'Key Points' and 'One Big Question' at the end of each chapter are useful in helping the reader reflect on the issues discussed.

Crucial to the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence will be planning at a whole school and departmental level. The chapter on planning deals with the 'big picture' in relation to the overall learning and teaching experiences offered within the school, planning a 'chunk', (a topic, a unit, or a module of work) and the 'loose/tight dilemma'. The loose/tight dilemma considers the issue of allowing for flexibility within the curriculum. Rather than providing templates Ruth identifies what planning guidelines need to address: connections with previous learning, clear objectives, learning outcomes, differentiation, resources, assessment approaches, records, outcomes, and feedforward, involving pupils. For me this provides a starting point to work with colleagues in the science department to plan for the implementation of the science curriculum.

Chapter Four deals with marking, on-going assessment and record-keeping. One of my concerns as a teacher is homework; who it is for, and how the benefits from it can be maximised. The same questions extend to end of topic tests. It is often the case that marking of this work is for summative, and accountability purposes. Ruth Sutton makes the point that in the marking of work the first accountability is to the learner and the purpose of the marking should be to help them improve their learning. This is a very pertinent point in light of Curriculum for Excellence and the learner at the centre. A lot of the issues discussed can be used to initiate discussion of current practice and to inform the review of department policies in relation to homework and other assessment strategies.

As mentioned earlier all the chapters are relevant, not least those on: portfolios, student involvement and what Ruth Sutton refers to as 'standards and standardising'. The latter may be more familiar to teachers in Scotland under the heading 'local moderation'. I will be recommending this book to my School Management Team firstly as reading for staff CPD but also for use in reviewing current policies and practice with a view to CfE and where assessment sits within this.