

Review: Sutton, Ruth (1995), *Assessment For Learning*, Ruth Sutton Publications, Lutterworth – Seán P Hagney, Feb 2009

As a secondary practitioner reading this text for the first time in 2009, this fourteen year old book is as relevant today as it was in 1995.

Ruth Sutton's easy style of writing and her acute understanding of the day-to-day frustrations and limitations which teachers face in their daily professional lives provide a backdrop for her views and ideas on how schools can best deliver sound assessment practice, which she argues is inexorably tied to quality learning and teaching. In a step-by-step way, Ruth Sutton covers all the major issues of assessment for learning, and Scottish practitioners who are familiar with the AifL programme will easily recognise that the key features of AifL resonate throughout this book.

The text itself covers key issues which link learning and teaching with assessment: planning; differentiation; progression; marking; portfolios; standards and standardising; student involvement. Each of these is treated to a full chapter, and the rationale for her ideas, suggestions on how to implement change and discussion on possible barriers to change are all addressed in a style which acknowledges that school improvement is not linear but complex, requiring a great deal of work, dedication and commitment on the part of school communities.

Ruth Sutton's candour and ability to 'know her audience' are major strengths of this book. She is able to talk with authority, yet manages to engage and challenge her reader as a fellow professional, linked through a common desire to deliver the best for young people in whatever circumstances they may find themselves.

Each chapter begins by explaining the terminology, and avoids getting unnecessarily technical. She describes the processes involved in, for example, sharing standards or creating useful portfolios of evidence, and relies heavily on real life examples. She also opens the debate by addressing the implications, and tackles the issues which concern teachers involved in change most, e.g. time, CPD and resources.

Ruth Sutton's perspective on her own teaching practice is also valuable. She has been a writer and provider of professional development for many years, and this has given her an objective view of the strengths and weaknesses of her own practice when she was in the 'front line'. As a practitioner on secondment, encountering new challenges to my own practice and having the luxury of reflecting on it from a distance, her honesty in her reflections are a laudable example of how we can all recognise the limitations of our own practice as we strive continually to do better.

As a consequence, there are many things from this book that I would take back to my school and department. For example, as a head of an RE department, I introduced many different methods of record keeping and recording of pupil achievement both within my own classroom and across the department. None of these methods worked to my satisfaction for a wide variety of reasons. Ruth Sutton's approach is to return to first principles – why do it? She suggests we need to think of the purpose and audience, and how we make them effective and efficient, which essentially entails that we make sure that our records are fit for a number of purposes – giving feedback to pupils to feedforward into their future learning (the primary focus), as well as for reporting within the department/school and to parents or other adults. I would see this as a first step

in organising a departmental (or indeed whole school) approach to recording pupil achievement, and could form the basis of professional discussion within my setting. Ruth Sutton's practical, manageable ideas of how this can be achieved would also prove helpful in focusing in on how to develop systems based on first principles. It is useful too that she recognises that if such things were easy, then we'd have all cracked it by now. A very reassuring insight...

The result of this practical approach to a number of key issues around assessment is that, by the end of the book, one should have a clear idea of what sound assessment practice should look like and how it can be taken forward within establishments.

The book is an accessible, enjoyable and thought-provoking read for class teachers and school managers. I would highly recommend this text.