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MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR THE CLASSROOM

Assessment for learning: how can we use evidence to drive and support student achievement?

The shame is,
assessment
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word



Assessment – this word has become a dreaded term, for both teachers and students. Many education systems feel that accountability can only be demonstrated through data, used as a stick to attempt to drive up student attainment. This has led to constant cycles of summative assessment – standardised testing, unit testing, maths tests, spelling tests, anything that will generate data on colourful graphs and charts - creating a culture of stress and the belief that achievement can only be measured by numbers.

In my experience, none of the assessment above is used to drive student achievement. The data generated is not likely to inform planning and therefore have impact on students directly (though

when used effectively it can be used to benefit the next cohort of pupils). Summative assessment is backwards-focused, designed to measure what has been learned and what a student can demonstrate in a given time on a given day. Students are compared against some kind of benchmark and can often be compared with each other. It is 'done to' students, rather than for or with. It is very much *assessment of learning*.

The shame is, assessment does not have to be a dirty word. It can be used effectively to drive student achievement, to ensure that teachers and students are able to plan the learning journey to suit themselves in order to ensure their own progress. *Assessment for learning* is using the information

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gathered in the classroom, from individuals and groups of students, to inform planning and meet the needs of each student in the class.

In this article I aim to define assessment for learning and give some practical examples of how it can be integrated into the classroom in order to enhance the learning for your students.

What is Assessment for Learning?

The best, and most succinct, definition that I have come across is that assessment for learning (AfL) 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 best to get there”* (Assessment Reform Group, 2002); it is one form of formative assessment. It encompasses a variety of methods and tools for teacher, peer and self-assessment that is then used to plan the next steps in order to enhance learning. AfL is integrated into classroom practice, is planned for when teaching and learning is planned and is a part of every learning session.

The key to effective AfL (and the difference between AfL and ‘teacher assessment’) is that the student is as involved as the teacher. It is based on the theory that knowledge and learning are ‘constructed’ by the learner; having been given the tools through the teaching process, and through their own assessment students can determine what they need in order to ‘continue the construction’. Assessment for learning helps the student to bridge the gap between what has been imparted during the teaching process and the ability to negotiate new skills and knowledge. Students should be taught to *“manage their own learning”* (Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, 2009), to make decisions about their learning experiences in order to achieve their best and to take ownership of their learning journey.

Whilst the student is the heart of AfL, it is essential that it is valued and used by the teacher to inform planning. Units of work planned weeks in advance, whilst helpful in order to guide the learning journey, must be adaptable in order to meet the needs of the students. Information and data that comes from AfL must be utilised to change groupings, offer support, scaffolding, tasks, lesson outcomes or even unit outcomes to ensure that all students are able to achieve to the best of their ability. Teachers should be committed to helping the students in their learning management and should be adaptable and flexible in all aspects of learning.

It is our role as teachers to ensure students are given the opportunity to ‘learn how to learn’. We must build in time and make this part of our lessons; our lessons should not just be a vehicle to pass on the content of the curriculum.

Some AfL Strategies

Below I would like to give you some ideas of how best to use AfL in your classroom. This is by no means an exhaustive list; there are hundreds of methods that are used every day in the best classrooms around the world.

Success criteria

The use of effective success criteria is, in my opinion, the best way that you can scaffold for your students to understand how they can achieve; the criteria act as a map for students through the learning journey. Success criteria show the students what ‘good’ actually is; this should never be hidden! An effective success criterion will give students something concrete to measure against and should allow them to immediately recognise their next steps.

An effective success criterion should:

- Be directly linked to the learning taking place at that time
- Be transferable beyond the lesson (based on skills, not content)
- Build on previous learning
- Be accessible and understood by students
- Be visible
- Be embedded in the teaching and learning.

Whilst the students get used to using success criteria, the teacher will need to provide them and model writing them with the class. As they become more familiar, students will be able to generate their own success criteria, thereby giving more ownership over the learning process.

Self and peer assessment

“For formative assessment to be productive pupils should be trained in self assessment so that they can understand the main purposes of their learning and thereby grasp what they need to do to achieve” (Black and Wiliam, 1998). The importance of self and peer assessment, as demonstrated by the above quote from Black and Wiliam, should never be underestimated. When students are trained to assess themselves, to reason and understand where they are in a learning journey, the impact is invaluable.

Self and peer assessment gives students a voice. Reflection is a tool that is often tacked onto the end of the lesson, yet it is one that should be embedded to encourage ownership and to nurture a student’s understanding of their responsibility to learn. It allows them to be heard, to explain their understanding, not only of the concept being taught but of their achievements up to that point. Through both their explanation of current learning and verbalising their next steps, teacher and students can elicit feedback on their true level of understanding; this should then be used to inform future planning (and by future, I can mean that afternoon, the next day, the next week or the next term - whatever meets the needs of the student).

There are some really easy tools that can be used for this type of assessment. Any kind of traffic light, scales, Venn diagram, thumbs up and thumbs down all work, however I would like to issue a warning with these - the evidence generated will be useless unless a level of reasoning from the pupil is used to complement it. For example, if a child believes she is a green light for a particular skill, be sure to have her tell you why; the assessment then becomes less impulsive and more reflective for the student.

Peer assessment is also effective, as long as students are taught to use the tools effectively. Using

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plus, minus, interesting (PMI), what went well and even better if (WWW and EBI), two stars and a wish or response sandwiches are all effective if used correctly. Giving guidelines, like judging purely against the success criteria, can ensure that peers are giving useful feedback to their partners.

There are so many online and app tools that can be used for both self and peer assessment as well. Socrative is one that I particularly like; Padlet is another. I have put a link in the bibliography to a site that lists many different online tools that you may find useful. Sometimes, just an old fashioned whiteboard and whiteboard pen is all you need!

For in-depth reflection, these questions can be used as a whole, or students can pick their own and respond verbally or in writing:

- What did you find difficult? WHY?
- What did you find easy? WHY?
- What would you change next time?
- What do you need more help with?
- Have you learnt anything new?
- Do you have any questions?

Plenaries

Whilst plenaries are not in themselves AfL tools, when AfL strategies are planned into them effectively they can be used to generate reflection and insight into the students' understanding. Plenaries do not have to come at the end of a lesson, nor are you limited to one within a lesson. They can be with the whole class, or just a small group. It can be useful to anchor the plenary to the success criteria in order to embed its use. They can also be, at times, spontaneous, as and when the need arises in your classroom.

Some of the below ideas can be useful ways of using AfL in your plenaries. They move away from the question and answer recap style plenary, engaging pupils whilst helping them to assess their own understanding. Again, this is not an exhaustive list:

- Move to the answer type games

- Summarise today's learning in five sentences or words
- Beat the teacher
- Plan the next lesson
- What's the question? – a Jeopardy style game.

Plenaries, in whatever form they take, are an essential part of the AfL process. It has been found that *“teachers in the best schools are twice as likely as teachers in poor schools to use a plenary and they use it to recap on the lesson, provide feedback, challenge thinking and provide opportunities for further discussion”* (Berliner, 2011).

Do something with AfL

In many classrooms I have visited in my career, I have seen many of these strategies used, and more; I have, however, seen them used many times with little effect. The strategies can only be effective if the evidence generated is then used to adapt planning, ensuring that the needs of all learners are met and that each student is given the opportunity, skills and support to achieve the best they can. Assessment for learning should be an embedded part of every learning situation; it should be planned for and valued. It is only when teachers approach planning with flexibility and a freedom to do what is right for their students will students achieve their very best.

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Try to learn something about everything and everything about something.

Thomas Huxley

If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?

Albert Einstein

I am not afraid of storms for I am learning how to sail my ship.

Louisa May Alcott

I am always doing that which I cannot do, in order that I may learn how to do it.

Pablo Picasso

I learned long ago, never to wrestle with a pig. You get dirty, and besides, the pig likes it.

George Bernard Shaw

I made my own assessment of my life, and I began to live it. That was freedom.

Fernando Flores