

UNPICKING THE MYTH OF 'THE TEST': USING MASTERS' LEVEL INVESTIGATIONS TO DEVELOP TRAINEE TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

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How long are we meant to be using that **** thing – two stars and a wish?

Er ... I think it's meant to be forever, mate.

(overheard in a secondary school staffroom)

Introduction

The attitude exemplified here towards a feedback tool commonly used in the compulsory school sector captures an aspect of the issues involved in embedding a range of assessment practices into educational contexts at primary, secondary and post-compulsory/tertiary levels. Under the influence of the pioneering approaches developed by Black and Wiliam following their substantial review of the assessment literature (1998), practitioners in all sectors have attempted to move from assessment models in which the 'first priority in [their] design and practice is to serve the purposes of accountability, or of ranking, or of certifying competence' to one which serves 'the purpose of promoting students' learning' (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p. 2). It is a move that has been a problematic one, not least because it has taken place against a national backdrop 'dominated by the needs of certification' (Boud and Falchikov, 2007, p. 4).

The challenge: understanding assessment

For trainee teachers entering any sector, the context for learning how to combine summative and formative practices in a way that will lead to sustainability for learners is a very challenging one, both for the trainee teachers themselves and for those training them, particularly in what is often only a ten or eleven month course with a huge variety of factors to be juggled. For those working in the compulsory sector and therefore subject to the Qualifying to Teach Standards (TDA 2008), trainee teachers need to know how to:

- ▶ contribute effectively to the summative assessment processes currently used to measure pupils' progress (SATs – as appropriate; GCSEs; GCEs; diplomas; diagnostic standardized tests as appropriate; use of national and local data)
- ▶ assess pupil attainment across a range of examination and coursework assessment tools at all levels of ability and across the appropriate key stages
- ▶ use effective formative assessment practices to underpin their planning and ensure progression for pupils
- ▶ understand the strengths and flaws of the underlying assessment mechanisms currently used in schools whilst at the same time operating within the systems employed by their placement schools
- ▶ be able to critique those processes and mechanisms and to articulate a vision of assessment for learning that focuses on enhancing pupils' learning rather than simply measuring it
- ▶ support pupils in becoming independent, autonomous learners.

The paper gives an overview of how one university education department uses a masters level classroom-based investigation to prepare its secondary English trainee teachers to grapple with the complexities of effective assessment in settings with very diverse practices.

Context

The on-going debates about the purpose and effectiveness of current testing regimes at all levels of education are widely explored in the assessment literature, (for example, Coffield 2008; Ecclestone 2007; Finlay et al. 2007; Gardner 2005; Marshall and Drummond 2006), particularly in relation to the 'negative effects of high-stakes testing on teaching and learning' (Shepard, 2000, p. 14) and in an accountability culture where the emphasis is on assessment as a means of quality assurance, determining achievement against fixed outcomes with 'students as passive subjects' (Boud 2007). What is needed instead, it is argued, is an assessment practice that 'encourages engagement with learning, develops autonomy and motivation

and raises levels of formal achievement' (Ecclestone, 2007, p. 41) as well as what Boud (2000) calls 'sustainable assessment' whereby assessment for learning fosters reflexivity and self-regulation so that students are enabled to become active learners able to 'look again, to monitor one's own performance, to see one's own learning in the context in which it is deployed and to respond with awareness to the exigencies of the tasks in which one is engaged' (Boud, 2007, p. 21).

It is over twenty years since the Task Group on Assessment and Testing for England and Wales (DES, 1988, p. 13), under the chairmanship of Professor Paul Black, identified two of the four generic purposes of assessment as diagnostic assessment to identify students' learning needs and formative assessment to support and encourage learning. The report warned that:

The assessment process itself should not determine what is to be taught and learned. It should be the servant, not the master, of the curriculum. Yet it should not simply be a bolt-on addition at the end. Rather, it should be an integral part of the educational process, continually providing both 'feedback' and 'feedforward'. It therefore needs to be incorporated systematically into teaching strategies and practices at all levels.

However, a decade later in their seminal report 'Inside the Black Box' (1998), Black and Wiliam were still having to argue that despite the efforts of governments throughout the world to raise the standards of learning through 'National, state, and district standards; target setting; enhanced programs for the external testing of students' performance; surveys such as NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) and TIMSS (Third International Mathematics and Science Study); initiatives to improve school planning and management; and more frequent and thorough inspection' the 'sum of all these reforms has not added up to an effective policy because something is missing'. They identified this 'something missing' as the need to enable teachers to improve the processes of teaching and learning in the classroom, to give them the skills that they need to 'manage complicated and demanding situations, channelling the personal, emotional, and social pressures of a group of 30 or more youngsters in order to help them learn immediately and become better learners in the future' (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p. 1). They cited the warning given by Stigler and Hiebert (1997, pp. 19-20, in Black and Wiliam, 1998, p. 1) that 'A focus on standards and accountability that ignores the processes of teaching and learning in classrooms will not provide the direction that teachers need in their quest to improve.'

This publication was described by the DfES in 2004 as 'an influential pamphlet that ... is well known and widely used, and acts as a touchstone for most professionals in the field of assessment' and the principles that it espoused were subsequently incorporated as a national strategies initiative (Assessment for Learning 2004) with a range of follow up publications and training to enable schools to embed assessment for learning in their practices (Assessment for Learning Strategy 2008; Assessing Pupil Progress, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010; Getting to Grips with Assessing Pupil Progress 2009; Assessment for Learning with Assessing Pupil Progress 2009). It is ironic therefore that this was accompanied by accountability measures that sent teachers scuttling into a 'teach to the test' mode.

Although schools *appear* to have embraced the notion of assessment for learning alongside assessment of learning that drives much of the educational agenda at policy level, the experiences of trainee teachers emerging from their formal and tertiary education suggest that they enter their professional training with a very limited view of assessment, still seeing it as 'a test. This meant that pupils sat in silence and individually answered questions on topics they had previously covered in order to verify their understanding (secondary maths trainee)'. They have very limited experiences of the approaches that characterise assessment for learning and they subsequently observe these being implemented in very tokenistic ways in school, as exemplified by the quotation at the start of this paper. Broadfoot (2007, p. 143) argues that 'there are at last indications that this route to improving the quality of learning in the classroom may actually now be beginning to become a reality with new assessment techniques being widely explored', although she also points out that 'the vast bulk of assessment activity, whether in schools or universities, continues to be a more traditional kind ... [receiving] the lion's share of institutional resources and of teachers' and students' attention' (2007, p. 143). This has resonance with Boud's view that although Black and Wiliam's ideas about formative assessment were initially adopted to some extent by higher education, these have been marginalised since 2004. Ecclestone (2007) in relation to the post-compulsory sector, explores how 'apparently agreed meanings and principles of formative assessment can conceal very different learning goals' examining the ways in which the post-compulsory sector has adopted formative assessment practices

that 'improve rates of achievement whilst encouraging instrumental and limiting forms of motivation and autonomy'. Likewise, Coffield refers to the 'ritual genuflection [that] is made to the central importance of learning, but the sermon swiftly becomes a litany of what the government considers to be the really key elements of transformation – priorities, targets, inspection grades and funding – and the topics of teaching and learning disappear from sight' (Coffield, 2008, p. 1).

It is therefore incumbent upon those training the next generation of teachers to ensure that they are equipped to develop assessment practices that enable them to support pupils in becoming pro-active and independent learners.

The development: embedding formative assessment into practice through Masters level assignments

The PGCE course at the University of Wolverhampton is built around two modules at level six and two at level seven. The first modules are entitled 'Teaching, Learning and Assessment 1: The Beginning Teacher' and 'Professional Values, Personal Development' focusing on the fostering of reflective critical practice. Both modules are linked explicitly to a school placement incorporating six weeks teaching practice. The first of the two level seven modules 'Teaching, Learning and Assessment 2: the Developing Teacher' is linked to the final teaching placement in the form of a critical exploration on one issue of their choice. The second module, Subject Specific Pedagogy (SSP), gives trainee English teachers the opportunity to undertake a classroom-based investigation into the use of formative, as well as summative, assessment practices in order to demonstrate how they have enabled pupils' progress in speaking and listening over several sequences of lessons, critically evaluating their own use of a range of assessment practices. Rather than giving them a more independent choice of focus, this area was chosen because of the current lower status of oracy compared to that of reading and writing in schools. Building on the continual emphasis throughout the training year on the importance of effective formative assessment for teaching and learning, the SSP module is designed to challenge trainee teachers' (mis)conceptions of assessment and provide them with a vehicle through which they can interrogate the practices and philosophies that they encounter in their school context. In particular, they are encouraged to critique the banality of much that passes as 'self- and peer-assessment'. In their first sequence of assessment for the investigation, trainee teachers often mirror the vague self- and peer-assessment that they see too often in school, relying on simple tick-lists of characteristics. Pupils assign levels without being given sufficient insight into success criteria. Responses are vague and focus on superficial presentational characteristics such as 'confidence', 'maintained eye contact', 'spoke clearly' with little or no focus on the quality of content, language and structural choices or rhetorical skill. The structure of the module encourages the trainee teacher to critique this process so that by the final sequence of the investigation, pupils are showing a much more secure insight into their own performance and that of others and can set much more meaningful targets for future learning.

One of the key objectives of the training year is to encourage trainees to become reflective and autonomous learners themselves at the same time as supporting their pupils to develop the same characteristics. As indicated earlier in the paper, the tensions inherent in many schools in relation to the perceived need to 'teach to the test', mean that trainee teachers frequently encounter scepticism in schools about adopting what are seen as 'idealistic', 'impractical' approaches. However, because it is part of their compulsory module, trainee teachers are 'allowed' to carve out time to carry out their investigation and therefore to experiment with innovative approaches. In more positive training contexts, schools embrace the investigation enthusiastically and are heavily involved in the design, execution and evaluation of it. The investigation therefore gives the trainee teachers the space they need to explore the issues arising from the uncritical and tokenistic adoption by many schools of formative assessment techniques such as 'self- and peer-assessment', 'sharing learning objectives', 'two stars and a wish feedback' and 'traffic-lighting' (to indicate 'confidence' levels by pupils). This aspect of their professional development as teachers reflects Larivee's recommendations that 'the best antidote to take control of their teaching lives is for teachers to develop the habit of engaging in systematic reflection about their work' in order to combat the 'escalating pressure to be accountable for students reaching imposed standards of performance [which] increases the likelihood of teachers using teaching strategies that prioritize efficiency and expediency, which ... can leave teachers feeling powerless' (2008, p. 341).

Assessment of Speaking and Listening

Although, since the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1989, the place of talk in the classroom has received more official recognition than in previous educational history, the National Strategies contextual paper on speaking and listening pointed out that:

Regional advisers and local authority consultants had noticed across the country that whereas speaking and listening was a significant feature of English lessons for all ages, it tended to be used as a tool to support and guide reading or writing, and was rarely addressed on its own merit, and even more rarely, explicitly taught or assessed. Rather, teachers seemed to expect that pupils' skills as speakers and listeners would develop simply through doing it. As Cameron (2002) says, 'In the modern era, talk has more often served as the medium of instruction rather than as its object.' (DCFS, 2007)

In the context that speaking and listening might be described as the 'Cinderella' of English, training in university sessions encourages the trainee teachers to consider the varieties of classroom talk that they have observed and used in school and to reflect on the idea that speaking and listening, just like reading and writing, needs to be taught and assessed in a way that leads to 'the progressive development of ability' (Kempe and Holroyd, 2004, p. 3). They are introduced to Vygotsky's theory of learning as a social and communicative process, in which the inter-relationship between thinking, talking and learning is paramount (Vygotsky 1978, in Myhill, 2005, p. 98) and to a range of ideas about the place of dialogic talk (for example, Mercer, 2003, 2006; Alexander 2003; Grainger 2004; Copeland 2005; Myhill 2005; Lefstein 2006; Thompson 2006). They explore the use of Socratic Circles (Copeland 2005) in facilitating talk that is more dialogic and as an antidote to the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) process most commonly used by teachers (Mercer 2006).

The SSP investigation

The investigation requires them to identify an aspect of speaking and listening that a focus class needs to develop further and to embed this within one of the schemes of work that they will teach on the placement. An exemplification is provided by trainee R and the quotations are taken from her SSP assignment. She wanted to use 'the Socratic Circle (focusing on Euthanasia) as the main activity to enhance pupils' critical engagement of each other's responses and to encourage dialogic talk'. She first of all conducted a baseline assessment which gave her 'an ideal opportunity to trial various elements such as the self-evaluation process beforehand.' She used her baseline assessment in order to 'assess the honesty of the self-evaluations from the group discussion task and for the purpose of agreeing targets with pupils' but it also gave her the:

opportunity to reflect upon my own classroom practice; I realized that I was frequently interrupting the flow of the group discussions by having more involvement than necessary, which needed to be addressed in the Socratic Circle to come, especially as the process requires pupils to take ownership of their talk and learning. (Johal 2009)

For a trainee teacher who exhibited the customary didactic approaches early in her training year, her comments signify marked progress in moving towards recognition of the need for pupils to develop the autonomy and independence that Ecclestone argues can be a casualty of the climate in which 'political concerns about engagement and participation, rather than goals of subject-based knowledge, encourage formative assessment practices that improve rates of achievement whilst encouraging instrumental and limiting forms of motivation and autonomy.' (Ecclestone, 2007, p. 315)

In the course of the investigation, trainee R employed a number of formative assessment strategies such as pupil reference to negotiated targets that had been drawn up between activities, modelling the targets that she had set for herself ('to stop interrupting and allow pupils to continue and explore topics independently'). Success outcomes were explored and models provided. When pupils were initially slow to respond, she realized that rather than posing closed questions, she should have followed Copeland's suggestion to use questions that are 'open-ended, philosophical in nature' and that 'help participants explore the meaning and importance of the issues raised in the text' (Copeland, 2005, p. 66). Reflecting on this she realized that this initially 'slowed down the pace of the lesson which resulted in me intervening - too quickly - to question pupils further in order to keep the discussion flowing', although pupils did start to engage more readily and 'began to question each other's ideas, showing a gradual increase in confidence and ability to critically engage with each others' responses' (Johal 2009).

In considering the ideas of Alexander (2003) and of Mercer (2003, 2006) in relation to cumulative talk where 'pupils build on each other's contribution, [and] add information of their own in a mutually supportive, uncritical way to construct shared knowledge and understanding' (Mercer, 2006, p. 31), she also absorbed Lefstein's advice to consider the 'potential benefits of dialogue that starts from difference and proceeds through critical argument and inquiry to competing understanding and further inquiry' (2006, p. 13). She acknowledged her tendency to 'inadvertently offer more guidance and support than necessary without gauging the deeper level of understanding from the pupil, hence failing to act as what Myhill and Warren (2004) refer to as a "temporary scaffold" in discussions. This takes away the ownership of learning from pupils, something which professionals should strive to give their pupils, not eliminate' (Johal 2009). This represents a considerable degree of sophistication after what is essentially four months in the classroom and suggests that the investigation is a useful vehicle for trainee teachers to explore the quality of their feedback and its impact upon pupils' learning and progress since as Hattie and Timperley point out: 'Feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement, but this impact can be either positive or negative' (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p. 81).

In evaluating her own assessment practices, R drew attention to weaknesses in her initial self-evaluation sheet which comprised of tick boxes against national curriculum descriptors compared to the more open-ended comments boxes that she used for the final sequence which required supporting evidence for their judgements. She remarked on how accurately most of the pupils assessed both themselves and their peers which suggests that they had ownership of the criteria through exploring these and looking at exemplification. She recognized the need to reinforce instructions about peer-evaluation with visual instructions to avoid uncertainty and to emphasize that feedback should be couched in honest but sensitive language since some pupils were 'brutal'.

She was very pleased about the fact that:

Pupils benefitted once Pupil X and Y started the dialogue from difference (Lefstein, 2006) and proceeded through critical argument which in turn furthered their own inquiry and that of those who were listening ... they were highly critical of each other's ideas and did not hesitate to make their views heard as they were eager to sway others' opinions. In light of this, other pupils also began to modify their views, demonstrating good listening skills as well as critical engagement.

Concluding comments

If learners in whatever context are to be equipped with the skills that 'enable them to think for themselves, and be self-initiating, self-modifying and self-directing' (Earl and Katz, 2008, p. 90), then it is vital that their teachers are equipped with the skills to enable them to become that type of learner and not the passive learner described by Boud (2007) and this requires that teachers develop a 'deeper understanding of the ways that assessment can help pupils become thoughtful, self-regulating and self-monitoring learners' (Earl and Katz, 2008, p. 91). We would claim that undertaking this type of investigation promotes significant progress in trainee teachers' assessment practice compared to the start of the course where the usual response when asked to assess pieces of pupils' work is to attack the spelling errors and make generalized comments about this piece being 'weak', this one 'quite good' and this one 'fantastic'. They become much more skilled at articulating what pupils need to learn and at personalizing learning targets which are negotiated with individuals. They employ a much wider range of assessment practices and their use of peer- and self-assessment has become much more sophisticated as they have developed a much better sense of when these are simply tokenistic and when pupils have internalized the relevant criteria and understand the extent to which they have met them.

The SSP investigation equips them to demonstrate a much more secure grasp of the very demanding QtT Standard Q28: 'Support and guide learners to reflect on their learning, identify the progress they have made and identify their emerging learning needs' (TDA 2008) and the number of skills that they must cement in order to consolidate this standard is demonstrated in the following extract from trainee R's conclusion to her investigation:

I was very pleased with the outcome of the investigation. Pupils had taken ownership of their learning and had proved that they can progress once speaking and listening skills are explicitly taught. The pupils had embedded the success criteria and had effectively conducted peer-assessments and self-evaluations, benefitting them to become reflective learners. The self-assessment process was an integral part of the speaking and listening assessment and not as Black and Wiliam (1998) state, 'treated as an added extra.' (Johal 2009)

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