

RJA2

Assessment for Learning – On the use of self- and peer-assessment

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Introduction

Assessment for learning, or formative assessment, is a term that is used in the educational sphere to describe those assessment methods that are found to “impact directly on pupil achievement and learning outcomes.” (Muijs & Reynolds, 2011) This central tenet of the British education system has been evidenced through the seminal work of Black & Wiliam (1998) in which they reviewed over 250 articles to conclude unequivocally that formative assessment does in fact improve standards. The key factor dictating this being that there must be feedback when assessing, and then using this information to adapt teaching and learning to meet the learner’s needs and bridge the gap between what they can and cannot do. Sadler (1989) goes on to reiterate that all feedback must contain the desired goal, evidence about their current position, and some sort of understanding on a method to close the gap between the two.

The QCDA (2009) advised for formative assessment to have this positive effect: learning goals of the lesson must be shared with the students; assessment criteria must be clearly communicated to the students in a way they understand; and effective feedback is essential to the process. This constitutes finding out the learner’s strengths, provide advice on weaknesses, and allow the student time to reflect on the work done and opportunity to improve upon their work.

Usually, assessments often hold negative connotations; those of marks, levels, grades, ranking and comparing to other students. Assessment for learning can alleviate this and change the culture in the school according to Kennedy (2007), as it becomes an everyday experience unlike summative assessments and its primary focus is to help each student improve their learning, not to compete for grades or levels.

Within the assessment for learning domain, I will be focussing on the use of self- and peer-assessment. The rationality for this is that my school is currently heavily focussed on improving formative assessment and increasing the use of self- and peer-assessment in particular. Moreover, there has been some evidence (Noonan & Duncan, 2005) to suggest that by utilising regular self- and peer assessment, achievement can be increased.

Impact in the classroom

During my first few months of teaching, I did not have a proper vision for self- and peer-assessment, but instead just set a task, supported students during it, and provided answers at the end instructing students to give themselves a score out of 5, for example. In my mind, this classed as self-assessment. However, once the department’s formative feedback policy was introduced in the latter half of the winter term, it made me reflect on my practice, and what successful assessment should include.

What I had been doing amounted to simplistic marking of one's work. Although this identified where the students were at, at the particular moment in time, there was no explicit identification of where the students could improve. More importantly, there was no advice either by peers or by myself as the teacher as to how the students could improve. This, as described above, is a key facet of formative assessment. Since there was no identification on how students could improve to achieve the learning outcomes, there was no subsequent opportunity to improve their work and understanding. Therefore, there is no way that what I had been doing in the early days of my practice was in fact self-assessment, let alone assessment for learning.

In line with the departmental marking policy, I regularly use "WWW" (what went well) and "EBI" (even better if) as a means for students to reflect on their work. The students are instructed to fill these in themselves each marking cycle. In addition to this, I will write a "To improve:" target as well, prescribing one thing they should answer to improve their work. This is similar to what Black & Wiliam (1999) describe as "scaffolded responses," in that feedback should be given support to move on to the next level. After marking, in the next lesson, the student is given directed time to complete these reflection tasks. This forms the foundation of my current practice in self-assessment.

To successfully implement further self- and peer-assessment into the lesson, I had to actually plan for self-assessment in the lessons. I did this by selecting activities, questions or tasks that could require comprehensive criteria to be met in order to meet the learning goals. Most often, this led to the use of exam-style questions for KS4 and cloze type tasks for the less confident KS3 groups. The mark schemes for such activities could be easily found and adapted for use in lessons to convey the success criteria to the students.

Once completed, I would instruct the students to pass their work to the person next to them signifying they are to peer-assess. Placing the marking criteria on the board, the peer would then check the student's work for them. In future, I would also like to introduce the idea that the peer would write their own "To improve:" target to the student, based on the work they have just marked for them. This places the peer in the position of the teacher, and Black & Wiliam (1998) have suggested that this is oftentimes very valuable as students may be more inclined to accept criticisms from their peers than if offered by the teacher. Furthermore, it is proposed that by taking the role of the teacher or the examiner, students and peers both improve their learning.

What I have also noticed is that students often need training on how to work successfully in peer groups before any successful assessment can take place. Students need to be taught as a prerequisite, how to listen when another is talking, to take turns speaking and to be constructive and not insulting with their feedback comments. This is not only the case with the lower ability groups, but even with the "A Band" higher ability groups.

In implementing self and peer-assessment in my classroom, I was initially wary of the fact that the information collected will not be very reliable. This is as students may show tendencies to be dishonest with their marking or show bias when marking another's work. McCallum (2000) suggests that in order to train students in the art of self- and peer-assessment, it is essential to: define what this means; explain the learning objectives; describe how it will positively impact and aid learning; and inform students that this type of formative assessment will help to guide the student down the best route to improve learning. So far, I have only explained how to self- or peer-assess in terms of

the logistics, but never have I ever explained to the students why we were doing this or got them to appreciate the impact of this on their learning.

The primary impact review of the self- and peer-assessment that I have conducted for a school CPD project has shown some small progress. Where before, students would just tick and give themselves a mark out of something, some students now focus on this on their fortnightly “WWW” or “EBI” comment depending on how they did. Where students were initially reluctant to hand their work to their peers, there is now a wider acceptance of the peer-assessment method, and it has been routinised. However, as with everything in teaching and learning, there is always room for improvement.

During my second school placement, I observed some valuable self- and peer-assessment in lessons conducted in their Science department. Before setting any work that is due to be self or peer assessed, the teacher would give a numbered list of levelled or graded criteria on what each answer or section completed corresponds to. This then informs the student’s work in the first instance. Once the work has been completed, the student self-assesses their work by numbering each bit of their work to indicate what they think they have achieved. Alternatively, with homework, I have seen this peer-assessed instead too. An emphasis on the importance of self- and peer-assessment is made by the teacher by indicating that work not assessed in this manner will not be marked by the teacher.

With peer-assessment, the teacher will put up a list of common issues with that particular question or activity and relevant improvement targets. In assessing the work, the peer would pick and write the appropriate target for the student. This clarity and support was instrumental in promoting useful peer-assessment. This seems to be a more empowering tool that I would like to include in my future practice. The final process in this method would be teacher assessment of the work to ensure reliability and give a further improvement target to achieve or even go beyond the learning goal. After each assessment stage, the student was given time to improve their work based on the peer’s or teacher’s target. This dual-staged reflection process gave students twice as much opportunity to act on feedback.

Something else that I would like to implement in the future is the use of showing students model work that either meets the criteria, or better still, does not meet the criteria. In this manner, I hope to place the students in the examiners shoes once more, and ask them to grade the work provided based on the criteria. Once they have done so, I would be able to ask them to suggest improvement targets for the model student and thereby show them how work can be improved. This hopefully will be a more engaging way to conduct assessments.

Once these self- or peer-assessment steps have been completed, it will be imperative to provide students with sufficient improvement time and opportunity to ask for further support during class time. Albeit, this will prove difficult with a tight curriculum schedule, I think such time can and should be afforded on a fortnightly basis, and could prove to pay dividends in the long term.

Conclusion

Effective use of formative assessment has been shown to raise standards, and I hope to do the same for my students by implementing and refining an appropriate self- and peer-assessment policy drawing upon the research and personal reflections I have highlighted in this brief report. The most

important factor determining its efficacy will be that students are given time to reflect, time to think, time to learn in this manner.

It is also important to note that self- and peer-assessment, although forming an aspect of formative assessment, and teaching and learning in general, it could be the key to increased engagement amongst my students, and the key to changing the culture of learning and ultimately lead to improved behaviour, progress and ultimately, attainment.

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