

Investigating students' experience of formative assessment

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Abstract

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Introduction

Assessment is an ongoing professional interest of mine. I have witnessed its ability to help or hinder learning; and seen its application mediated by a teacher's own pedagogical beliefs and assumptions. It seemed to me that students might encounter the same assessment practice as being either formative or not, depending on the way the teacher uses it. The application of Assessment for Learning (AfL) techniques was a case in point. For example, I remember an ex-colleague who used 'increased wait time' in an ostentatious fashion, staring at his watch to count the seconds allowed for responses to be formulated. He then declared 'Right!' to a class often intimidated into silence. He was using the technique in a behaviourist fashion, expecting given outcomes (improved measurable attainment) from their altered behaviour (the adoption of new techniques). Yet, I saw others use the very same practice to nurture and explore student potential. The technique was the same; the intent, application and outcome very different.

I wanted to explore the ways in which our assessment practice is actually experienced by the students. We needed a better understanding of how students experience and respond to what we hope might be formative assessment practice in order to ensure that it actually is formative. Thus, my project had two purposes: to generate discussion and reflection about assessment, and by doing so, improve assessment practice in the school.

The project design

The project used a range of approaches to explore the question ‘What nurtures your learning potential?’ Descriptions of memorable experiences, imaginary teachers providing ‘perfect’ feedback, and future models for improved assessment practice enriched the data. Students were also asked to consider school assessment systems (reports, merit system). Later, they were asked to consider my tentative conclusions. The sample of students was a small, purposive one, chosen to elicit a range of thought. I used open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured, reflexive interviews as the main instruments for data gathering but also drew upon records of discussions in lessons to enrich this data.

The project took place over 15 months. I began by administering a questionnaire with my Year 9 group with the intention that this would be merely to pilot the instrument without using the data; however, the resulting data was so rich that I decided to use it instead. With the same group, I ran four research-based lessons to explore the questionnaire responses. I used all the technology at my disposal. For example, I fed the questionnaire data into an Excel database to analyse it. Throughout the lessons, I used my interactive whiteboard to display, query, explore and validate the data with the students. This also facilitated the use of other electronic files to develop discussion, such as an online PowerPoint giving normative ‘conclusions’ about quality feedback (Te Kete Ipurangi, 2005).

My initial analysis of the survey data helped me to design a format for semi-structured interviews and improve the questionnaire. Over the following four months or so, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 14 students (11 Year 9s, 1 Year 11 and 3 Year 13s). Students were offered a choice of preferred times and places and asked to choose pseudonyms. Most interviews took about two and a half hours over three lessons.

The Year 11 student (Oscar) had stopped me in the corridor to ask if he had been chosen for the research as he had a strong desire to participate. He was a very interesting candidate: he had an Individual Education Plan (IEP) focused on his dyslexia and dyspraxia. Memories of negative assessment experiences ran through his interviews as did his frustration at having an IEP. His interviews were lively affairs during which he would pace in front of the whiteboard, my typing barely keeping up with his fluent

speeches. This contrasted dramatically with his short, written, questionnaire responses.

Using the Excel database proved an invaluable tool for thinking, organising and disseminating. At intervals I put updated versions on the intranet for staff to view; gave copies to the Headteacher, a Deputy and an Assistant Headteacher and also emailed various versions to interested Local Authority consultants. My student Oscar also asked for a copy. After a few months, I carried out an interim analysis and posted a summary on the intranet. This process of ongoing analysis and reflection was invaluable to me. It helped me improve my questionnaire, work out how to analyse the results and develop an interview script. I put this on the database too; it helped the fluency of my interviews, giving students a visual display of the questions on the interactive whiteboard.

Sharing the data with colleagues at various stages in the project also led to unexpected events, most notably the Headteacher's request that I provide workshops for colleagues. For this, I rewrote the interim analysis, highlighting key points, which we discussed. I also displayed the database in a large horseshoe around the room for people to browse and discuss.

The final data collection stage was a second set of research lessons with my Year 8 PSHME group. The lessons were based on three documents: the revised questionnaire; the aforementioned PowerPoint with 'conclusions' about quality feedback and the summary document prepared for the staff workshop. The group was interesting because the students differed hugely in ability, attitude, motivation, self-esteem and maturity. During discussions and written work, I paired very weak students with more literate students to ensure that the words of the less literate students could be recorded accurately.

Once the project was complete, I wanted to communicate key insights and some of the challenging and provocative statements that had emerged. For this, I chose to use display boards and a whole school assembly. I hoped that such communication would stimulate reflection, debate and discussion about assessment. I put up the displays in 'sociable', heavy traffic areas where students might be more likely to stop and read the material. The displays followed a recognisable format. In the centre of each board was the relevant research question in a think bubble. Around it, speech bubbles held a

selection of the students' comments, each bubble having a summative heading for speed reading. For a teacher, the displays could be read, effectively, as guidance for an expanded assessment repertoire, helping them to extend their current thinking and practice. For students, the displays could encourage both self-reflection and some understanding of why teachers might offer, and students might want, feedback in different ways.

I used the opportunity of the whole-school assembly to encourage students to read and consider the displays and, also, the 'new' ideas about assessment it introduced. Subsequent feedback from both students and staff demonstrated that this had been successful.

What we learned about assessment practice

The most productive question for me was: 'What sort of feedback helps you learn?'

Feedback that supports learning

Many students said that feedback helps them learn when it includes guidance on how to improve.

If I just get positive, it makes me think my work is perfect and cannot be improved. If I just get negative, it doesn't help my self-esteem so I think that I haven't done anything right.

(Student 8, Year 9)

Variously, students explained that the guidance should:

- be written and private
- include praise, '*positive feedback*'
- good points or encouragement
- '*be critical*', include '*negative feedback*'
- highlight weak areas or include error correction

One strong dimension was that a balance of 'positive' and 'negative' feedback was considered beneficial. Many students felt that positive feedback supports their self-esteem and helps to develop receptivity to critical feedback.

Generally, students used the term 'guidance' positively and the term 'critical' negatively. I explored individual students' personal boundaries between the two, often finding that one person's 'negative criticism' was another person's 'positive guidance'. How

the line between the two appeared to shift seemed to relate to many issues including resilience, self-belief and the personal relationship between the student and teacher. There was also exploration of the words 'positive', 'negative' and 'critical'. Students were introduced to ideas such as 'constructive criticism' or being a critic (as in one who makes judgements, be they positive, neutral or negative). This was in order to help them to recognise that the habit of using the word 'critical' only pejoratively is unhelpful. They might then recognise its broader meanings and explore the benefits of criticism. These discussions helped clarification and understanding of key assessment terms.

Many students said that feedback helps them learn when it is social or verbal, such as teacher-student 'tutorials', dialogues, or sharing work and ideas in class. Markus (Year 10) considered 'private feedback' harder because there was no exchange of views.

If you share, you can see where others did it right when you did it wrong.... In some subjects we don't share work at all, we just do work. It's a lot easier when you share work.

Several students said that feedback helps them learn when it is simple and easy to understand, such as bullet points, annotating throughout work or the use of the 'tick and arrow' system.

A different perspective came from Claire (Year 10) who argued that, in order to learn, feedback must be truthful.

If I get feedback that isn't truthful then I can't improve. I'll carry on doing the bad. But if I get truthful feedback, I'm going to learn from it, I can improve from it. Also, if I know I am doing well, then I know to carry on like that.

Insights also arose from the question: Does praise help you learn?

The role of praise

In recent years it has been suggested that it might be unhelpful to give praise (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Butler, 1987; Natriello, 1987; Siero and van Oudenhoven, 1995). Yet, many students cited praise as formative – an aid to learning. The students I talked to generally held that praise helps them in holistic ways – social, psychological, emotional and cognitive. Students explained that praise gives them encouragement and self-confidence; stimulates positive attitudes and

motivation; helps cognition; makes them feel satisfied; and strengthens the student/teacher relationship.

The three Year 13 students considered praise *'a boost when you're down'* and *'when you're doing really well, a boost to carry on succeeding'*. No praise was generally considered unproductive: *'If you feel constantly criticised, you won't want to try'*. Many students described how praise had increased motivation, giving them *'an incentive to work harder'* or to *'keep on learning'*. Praise also stimulates positive attitudes: *'Praise helps me learn by making me happy and glad to be working'* (Grace, Year 10).

Many students said that praise acts formatively by highlighting good points about their work which could then be repeated. The *'quick praise'* of ticks throughout work was liked for this reason. These students felt no need for an accompanying comment. Other students mentioned that praise strengthens the student/teacher relationship. Praise shows that a teacher is proud of a student's success/effort and this encourages the student to try to impress the teacher again to get more praise in *'a virtuous circle'* (Oscar, Year 11).

Some students warned that praise should be specific, sparing and valid so it did not inflate the ego or prevent learning taking place. Praise could lead to people feeling *'too good and becoming big-headed'* so teachers should *'praise a little but not so that they feel better than anyone else'* (Claire, Year 10). To avoid this *'a good variation of positive and negative points is really helpful'* (Student 8, Year 8).

Several students said that they would not feel content by receiving only praise because there would be no guidance for improvement and therefore no learning potential. Equally, some students said that praise alone could demotivate them because they would have nothing to aim for and so reduce their effort.

The students' emphasis on praise prompted a discussion about what a teacher should do when work is clearly not up to standard or inadequate. The general preference was for private 'criticism' and public or private praise. When asked, most students felt the teacher had an obligation to consider the student's feelings in the delivery of feedback; and, where the work had little or no redeeming features, to find a quiet, private time to give the feedback in a personal manner.

However, some students felt spurred to greater effort with the threat or actuality of public criticism of their work.

Another important question for me concerned the question of the giving of comments, marks or a combination of the two.

Comments versus marks

In recent years, it has been suggested that it is good practice not to put marks on students' work. Many studies have signalled the positive effect that comments alone have on both self-esteem and learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Black *et al.*, 2002, 2003, etc). Grades have been viewed as damaging because they reduce complex performances to a single dimension, creating a single global stratification scale (Simpson, 1981). Explicit recommendations have been made to avoid giving grades (Black and Harrison, 2004).

In this project, most students wanted both comments and marks. They viewed each as offering formative benefits. The mark was an '*easy reference*' (Oscar, Year 11) and progress indicator whereas the comments offered guidance on how to improve. The blend of normative and personalised feedback is more helpful because '*with the marks, you can easily tell your progress; with the comments, you can tell how to improve and what is right and what is wrong*' (Jane, Year 10).

Students felt that the regular marks act as targets and help them keep on track, recognising slippage earlier and allowing them to track improvement. As such, marks allow students to compare current against previous work, challenging themselves to exceed prior achievement. The comments also tell students how to keep on track, guiding them towards specific improvements. Some students said lower marks make them act on formative comments even more.

Some students see grades as essential from Key Stage 4 upwards due to the pressure of doing well in GCSEs and A levels. Teacher comments are interpreted as specific guidance about how to raise a potential grade. It is only at Key Stage 3 that more students seemed receptive to comment only marking.

Some students expressed concern about comment only or grade only marking. Grades alone can lead to bewilderment '*I will have the mark but I wouldn't know how I got it or how to improve*' (Student 2, Year 9-10) or can encourage laziness and the avoidance of improving

work if the grade was '*good enough*'. Comment only marking can lead to confusion or difficulty in seeing progress.

Another productive question focussed on what would cause students to act on feedback.

Motivation to act on feedback

In recent years, it has been considered good practice to motivate students to act on feedback by providing them with targets, linked to the idea of 'closing the learning gap' (Ramaprasad, 1983; Sadler, 1998).

The students I talked to said that they would act on feedback that:

- is clear, specific and relevant
- includes guidance on how to improve
- is written
- balances encouragement and guidance
- offers praise
- is an appropriate length
- is provided in an appropriate context
- is part of a desirable teacher-student relationship
- taps their intrinsic motivation

The most frequently mentioned factor was that feedback should be accessible, specific and easily understandable (whether verbal or written). One danger was overdoing it – swamping students with information or '*essays*' which made them feel that they could not act or could not be bothered to act. The annotation of work was preferred to terminal '*long paragraphs*' since annotation was specific, pinpointed feedback - and each point not very long. However, other students wanted detailed feedback '*explaining exactly what you have to do*' (Student 5, Year 9-10).

Many students also mentioned either written or verbal feedback as a motivator. Written feedback was seen to be motivating as it is easier to remember or because its format is simple and easy to follow. Preferred formats included bullet points, '*ticks, dots and arrows*' and annotation throughout the work. An ongoing teacher-student dialogue in the book had been motivating to Crystal (Year 10) as it was '*modern. Like MSN. Then you will look to see whether the teacher has written back.*' Verbal feedback is seen as motivating because it is more personal, more informal, giving the student more

confidence, or because questions could be asked and misunderstandings clarified. Oscar (Year 11) said *'the verbal push behind it means more'*. The potential for public humiliation via public verbal feedback motivates some (Markus, Year 10) and demotivates others (Crystal, Year 10).

Another factor in motivating students to act on feedback is guidance for improvement. However, some students will only act on guidance if it is directly linked to a chance of increasing future grades or positively assisting in other ways. Many students explored the balance of positive and negative comments that spur them to action.

Intrinsic motivation also led students to act on feedback. Jane (Year 10) spoke of *'that little annoying voice in my head telling me what to do'*; Jessica (Year 10) described *'knowing that I want to do well'*; another student wrote of *'knowing you can make the piece of work better and wanting to do it'*. Within this, the valuing of effort and attitude were mentioned by some students as spurs for action.

All the above leads me to believe that we need to take a quizzical approach when a student does not respond to feedback and consider whether the manner of our feedback should be adapted. We need to presume that the same formative feedback may result in very different outcomes in the students receiving it. We can only approach feedback that suits our students if we regard students as individuals not simply in their approach to learning but in its subset: their approach to assessment of their learning.

Other benefits and outcomes

The project was seen by several students as a spur to action and/or as improving their metacognition.

It's helping me see how I want the marking to be done.

(Gary, Year 10)

It helps me understand the way I work. It makes me look into what I do at work at school.

(Grace, Year 10)

... it's opening my eyes in different ways about how I could improve assessment for me. If I ask a teacher in a certain way, then maybe I can ask for verbal feedback... it's helping me because I can see how I might try to make something happen to make assessment work better for me and for the teacher.

Other students spoke of feeling listened to or cared for, leading to greater self-worth. Such comments show that this project also provided a platform for students to be heard, thus resonating with the work on 'student participation' and 'student voice'. The above demonstrates that teacher-student dialogue about assessment can, itself, lead to cognitive and affective benefits for students as well as informing professional dialogue about assessment and, hopefully, improving practice. Significant implications of the project, therefore, are that we need to promote such dialogue school-wide and maintain dialogue with the students as part of normal teaching and assessment repertoire.

The students' conception of formative assessment

Most of the students I talked to placed emphasis on fluid, dynamic aspects of formative assessment such as the teacher-student relationship. Their conception is holistic, incorporating psychological and emotional aspects (how their self-esteem waxes and wanes, how they lose or gain confidence and self-belief) and social aspects (how feedback affects their peer status, how students can develop feedback collaboratively). Their model of feedback is a human, social, cognitive and affective one.

This strengthens my belief that we need to examine our approach to feedback, questioning the nature of the underpinning pedagogy from which it derives. Some may conceive feedback in behaviourist terms as stimulus-response, linear and unidirectional, with the teacher in control of the learning process (Askew and Lodge, 2000). However, we could conceive feedback as an active exchange during which the students also direct the nature of the process. In this case, learning is a responsive, joint endeavour in which control is shared (Edwards, Gardini and Forman, 1993).

Conclusion

For me, the project confirmed the importance of the affective (social, psychological and emotional) dimensions of teaching and learning. It reaffirmed the simple message that, in giving feedback, teachers must attune themselves to both cognitive and affective dimensions.

The project enabled us as a school to examine our approaches to assessment and consider whether students are benefiting from current practice. Dialogue and discussion enables us to make transparent

and explicit the rationale behind our assessment methods and enables students to express their own views about the practices that nurture their learning potential. In this way assessment between teacher and student becomes '*a two-way street*' (Oscar, Year 11).

The project confirmed for me that a teacher's pedagogical philosophy informs and permeates everything she does. Recommended techniques and strategies can never replace deep thought about the process of teaching and learning. Many years ago, Vygotsky expressed his view of the assessing and teaching role as that of a gardener viewing his orchard.

The state of development is never defined by what has matured. If the gardener decides only to evaluate the mature or harvested fruits of the apple tree, he cannot determine the state of his orchard. Maturing trees must also be taken into consideration. The psychologist [or teacher] must not limit his analysis to functions that have matured. He must consider those that are in the process of maturing. If he is to fully evaluate the state of the child's development, the psychologist [or teacher] must consider not only the actual level of development but the zone of proximal development.

(Vygotsky, 1987:208-209)

He was describing the nurturing of incipient learning. The beauty, elegance and power of Vygotsky's metaphor remains pivotal in guiding me to evaluate continually the 'orchard' in which I teach and the resources I bring to help it 'grow'.

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