

Lesley Hetherington's Development Work: **Evaluating marking and feedback strategies** at St Francis College, Letchworth

Lesley Hetherington was a member of the Letchworth Schools' Teacher Led Development Work group (2005-06) and a part-time teacher of English at St Francis College, a secondary school in the independent sector.

Lesley was concerned that teachers invested a considerable amount of time and energy in the marking process and were dispirited when students failed to respond successfully to the constructive criticism about their work. She wanted to explore ways to ensure that her marking and feedback would make a difference to the students she taught.

The first thing Lesley discovered was that there is a great deal of literature available about assessment. She found most of this refreshing and inspiring. It seemed to resonate with her own experience and was rich in accounts of effective classroom practice with the experience of students being to the fore. In particular, she found Shirley Clarke's book *Formative Assessment in the Secondary Classroom* helpful (Clarke, 2005).

Another initial strategy was to visit a local primary school to learn more about the strategies the children had experienced before they came to St Francis. At St Thomas More Primary School the headteacher and staff shared with her their ideas for the 'Big Writing' initiative. This project emphasised the importance of sharing specific learning objectives with the learners and developing marking strategies based on the objectives set. This was a good practical illustration of some of the ideas that Shirley Clarke had put forward. Lesley gained a better understanding of the assessment strategies as well as the skills and experiences children bring with them when they transfer to secondary school.

Before trying out different approaches to marking and assessment in the classroom Lesley wanted the students' viewpoint. When she

explained her plans to the students, they seemed genuinely interested in her project and had many fascinating opinions and ideas to contribute. Having read about the findings of the Assessment Reform Group's review of research on formative assessment, (Black and Wiliam, 1998a; Black and Wiliam, 1998b) she wanted to see for herself the effects of 'comment only' marking. The research indicated that the impact on attainment was far higher when feedback consisted of constructive comments as compared with feedback in the form of marks and grades or a combination of comments and marks.

Lesley began her project by marking the work of students in Years 9 and 12 with comments only instead of marks or grades. She then used a simple self-evaluation tool to enable the students to express their feelings about the ways in which their work had been marked and assessed. She discovered that Year 9 students paid more attention to the comments but wanted to know their grades, whereas Year 12 students did not value comment only marking at all and relied on grades even when they were poor. She revised her strategy for year 11 and marked their work highlighting the positive points. This was very successful because it boosted their confidence and generated a positive discussion about how to improve grades in examinations. She was pleased to note a significant improvement in the quality of their writing in their next assignment.

Lesley then decided to focus on Year 9 and devised a questionnaire for them to complete. Their responses were enlightening. For example, students expressed frustration with the vague comments staff wrote and their often illegible handwriting. However, they appreciated it when staff highlighted the positive points about their work rather than commenting on their spelling and handwriting. They particularly valued being set clear learning objectives and having their work marked against those objectives. Praise emerged as important to them but they were also keen to know how they could improve their work.

Some of the points that students had made were about other teachers' practice. This indicated to Lesley that, if improvements to assessment practice were to take root in the school, she would have to begin to involve colleagues in the project. She consulted a number of colleagues on a one-to-one basis, asking them about their current strategies. She found their responses positive and supportive. Staff were keen to share their ideas and voice their concerns. Through these discussions, Lesley gained a good understanding of the range

of approaches to assessment and marking across the school as a whole. A genuine commitment to helping all students to achieve their potential was evident and it was abundantly clear that there was the need to find more opportunities within school to share ideas and good practice; to celebrate successes and support each other in development work.

So what could she do to maximise the impact of her development work? In order to share what she had done more widely, Lesley devised a powerpoint presentation and a set of follow-up questions to be used during an INSET day at the start of the following term. She wanted to report the highlights of her investigation and raise issues for discussion. She hoped that this would lead to a whole school evaluation of assessment techniques and strategies and that it would enable the debate to be taken forward across the school. The presentation at the INSET Day went well; it successfully raised the profile of assessment and a small, informal working group was established. Members of this group experimented with small incremental changes in assessment practice. Plans were then put in place for a follow-up INSET Day to be focused entirely on Assessment for Learning (Assessment Reform Group, 2002).

Overall, Lesley found the development work professionally refreshing; it had led to critical awareness about the strategies and techniques she uses in her day-to-day teaching. Collaborating with other departments in school has expanded her view of the role marking and feedback to students plays in helping them to achieve their potential. The impact on whole school development is as yet unknown but she is optimistic that her work has made a significant contribution to the school's pedagogical knowledge.

References

- Assessment Reform Group (2002) *Assessment for learning: Research-based principles to guide classroom practice – 10 principles*, <http://www.qca.org.uk/4031.html>
- Black, P. & Wiliam, D (1998a) Assessment and Classroom Learning. *Assessment in Education* 5(1), pp. 7-71.
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- Clarke, S (2005) *Formative Assessment in the Secondary Classroom*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.