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Assessment for learning : a brief history and review of terminology

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Abstract

This paper examines terms which are currently used to describe what has come to be known as assessment for learning. Relevant terms include formative assessment, assessment *for* learning, assessment *as* learning, learning orientated assessment and sustainable assessment. The varying constructions of assessment for learning embodied in these terms are considered. It is suggested that some models focus on only one or two aspects of assessment for learning, often with an emphasis on feedback. More holistic views of assessment for learning are desirable and one such model is presented which has at its heart the improvement of student learning.

Introduction

Assessment for Learning has become a popular term at all levels of education and a great deal of activity is centred around it. For example, there is currently a major assessment for learning initiative in the English school system informing the design and delivery of the national curriculum ([http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/personalisedlearning/five/assessment for learning/](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/personalisedlearning/five/assessment%20for%20learning/)). There has been a similar initiative in schools in Hong Kong (Carless, 2005). A number of universities now include Assessment for learning in their learning & teaching strategies or have developed initiatives and projects. Examples include Sheffield Hallam University's Assessment for learning initiative

(<http://www.shu.ac.uk/assets/pdf/2331LTAreportinorder.pdf>) and a programme conducted by the Australian Universities Teaching Committee

(<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/05/index.html>) which aims to 'enhance learning by enhancing assessment'.

Assessment for learning is widely seen as an important way in which to improve student learning. However, Paul Black, one of the most influential proponents of assessment for learning in the UK, has stated that it has become 'a free brand name to attach to any practice' (2006, p.11). This suggests that assessment for learning has become something of a bandwagon which many policy-makers and educational institutions are keen to join. It might be seen as a 'motherhood-and-apple-pie' concept which everyone can sign up to and feel good about but which may not lead to productive action. This leads us to ask questions about what is meant by assessment for learning and how the term is used.

A brief history of Assessment for Learning and related terms

The idea of using assessment to help learners and to advance learning has no doubt been around for centuries. However the use of assessment for learning as a specialist 'technical' term which embodies a call to action in educational practice is more recent. The Assessment Reform Group (<http://www.assessment-reform-group.org/>) was formed in 1989 by a group of educational

assessment researchers under the auspices of the British Educational Research Association and has been active and influential in promoting the concept and practice of assessment for learning. One of the Group's members, Caroline Gipps (1994) is often credited with introducing the term to the wider educational community, on the basis of making a clear distinction between assessment *of* learning, which is about evaluating what has been learnt and assessment *for* learning which is about using evaluation to feed into the learning and teaching process and thus improve learning. In this formulation, which is still in widespread use, assessment of learning is equated with summative assessment and assessment for learning with formative assessment. Tracing the history and current usage of assessment for learning is challenging as there are a number of other terms, including 'formative assessment', which appear to carry a very similar meaning to the term assessment for learning or at least overlap very substantially with it. Winter (2003, p. 767) wrote of the 'changing prepositions' of assessment – *of*, *for* and *as* learning. Carless and colleagues (Carless, Joughin & Mok, 2006) introduced the term 'learning-oriented assessment'. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) use the phrase 'assessment that supports learning'. These different terms demonstrate sometimes subtle sometimes quite substantial differences in their usages by different people and in varying contexts.

The term formative assessment has the longest history in the educational literature, usually being attributed to Scriven (1967) and was well-known before the recent rise to prominence of assessment for learning. The definition of formative assessment proposed by Sadler (1989) is very widely used and accepted as a basis for good practice. Sadler states that formative assessment must enable students to understand the goals or standards to be achieved and their own current level of performance and then guide them in taking action to close the gap. This requires students to develop 'expertise' in order to make effective judgements about their own performance. They need to develop evaluative skills which enable them to monitor and evaluate their own learning position, determine 'the size of the gap' and how to move towards closing it. Sadler argues that these evaluative skills can be developed by developing 'authentic evaluative experiences' for students.

Nevertheless, in their influential review of assessment practices across all sectors of education, Black and Wiliam (1998) state that formative assessment 'does not have a tightly defined and widely accepted meaning'. In their review, they refer to formative assessment as 'encompassing all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged'. They propose that formative assessment is as much about being able to work out, or evaluate what someone is able to learn as to what has already been learnt. Yorke (2003) also claims that there is a need for further theoretical development of the concept of formative assessment which 'needs to take account of disciplinary epistemology, theories of intellectual and moral development, students stages of intellectual development, and the psychology of giving and receiving feedback' (p.477).

Formative assessment is, especially in the school sector often regarded as part of good classroom practice but this is a much less common view in higher education. Angelo and Cross (1993) do promote this approach in universities using the term 'classroom assessment'. They describe classroom assessment as 'learner centred, teacher-directed, mutually beneficial, formative, context-specific, ongoing and firmly rooted in good practice.' They propose seven principles of classroom assessment, which include the development of an active assessment research community, clear teaching goals and objectives, appropriate and focused feedback, faculty involvement in the design of assessments and the development of 'simple tools' to assist teachers in the classroom. The final concept relates to the

sharing of assessment experience both with students and colleagues, resulting in what Angelo and Cross describe as 'mutually positive benefits' which can aid and assist the development of an improved learning process.

Black and Wiliam (1998) and many other authors clearly regard feedback as central to the concept of formative assessment or assessment for learning. It is worth noting that, in higher education, formative assessment is often in practice seen in a limited way *solely* as giving feedback to students. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) argue that the range and complexity of the effects of feedback within assessment have not been adequately conceptualised or theorized and outline a set of 'ten conditions under which assessment supports learning' which aim to address this complexity. These ten conditions, seven of which link explicitly to feedback, address levels of engagement with assessment tasks, time allocation, sufficient, timely feedback, the importance of student perception and understanding in relation to the assessment task and the centrality of student action in relation to feedback.

Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) offer an alternative set of conditions, in the form of a model of assessment and feedback that has learner self regulation at its core. Self-regulation is interpreted as the extent to which students can monitor and evaluate areas/aspects of their own learning behaviours, and then act on this information to improve their learning. This model makes visible the process of student self regulation from the initial assessment task and review of current knowledge, to individual interpretation and formulation of learning tasks, to the generation of both internal and external goals. The authors state that the outcomes which are then produced generate *internal feedback* which enables the student to re-evaluate goals, criteria and standards, and then compare the current stage of their own learning/understanding to the external standards/goals/outcomes which they wish to achieve. This model of learning leads to seven principles of effective feedback encompassing: clarity as to what constitutes 'good' performance, the promotion of self-assessment, encouragement of peer and teacher dialogue and the promotion of student self esteem and confidence.

Carless (2007) presents the term 'learning-oriented assessment' which has a broader focus and is primarily about developing the *learning* elements of assessment, rather than the measurement aspects, in addition to formative assessment and feedback. He outlines three principles which provide a framework for understanding the conceptual base of learning-oriented assessment:

- 1) Assessment tasks should be designed to stimulate sound learning practices amongst students
- 2) Assessment should involve students actively in engaging with criteria, quality, their own and/or peers performance.
- 3) Feedback should be timely and forward-looking so as to support current and future student learning.

This 'forward-looking' view of assessment is extended by Boud and Falchikov (2006) who propose a model of assessment which supports students learning beyond University and prepares them for a 'lifetime of learning in work and other social settings'. Boud and Falchikov introduce the terms 'learning for the long term' and 'sustainable assessment' in which they argue for a 'reappraisal of the role of assessment'. They argue that assessment for learning is not just about providing timely

feedback and improving student learning within the University, but is about whether or not assessment practices adequately prepare students to become effective 'assessors' of their own learning after University and throughout the life course.

Assessment for learning – positive or negative?

Assessment for learning is usually regarded very positively as a means of improving student learning. However there are some who are dissatisfied with it. One reason for the use of the term 'assessment as learning' is dissatisfaction with the narrower conceptions of assessment for learning as formative assessment/feedback. Earl (2003) regards assessment for learning as more or less synonymous with formative assessment and sees the teachers as 'the central characters' as they evaluate student performance, provide feedback and organise appropriate learning activities based on their knowledge of the students. Earl's interpretation of assessment *as learning* is that, in contrast, it emphasises the students' role and in particular engages them in self-assessment and as active participants in directing their own learning. The Scottish 'Assessment is for Learning Project' (<http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/assess/about/aboutaifl.asp>) makes a similar distinction. Assessment for learning is viewed as a set of processes which provide learners with information about their progress and the outcomes required. Assessment *as Learning* is viewed as learners being able to manage and take responsibility for their own learning and progress by means of reflection and review. As in the case of Earl, this view emphasises the centrality of the student.

There are other views of assessment *as learning*. Some authors stress the learning that takes place as students undertake assessment tasks as is the case with Carless (2007). Wolf (1993) was an early promoter of the practice of meaningful and complex assessment tasks that can be 'episodes of learning' (p. 224) in contrast to tests which only set out to measure what has been learnt and often do so in ways which do not encourage productive learning in the period prior to testing. This view of assessment as learning links closely to ideas about authentic assessment (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989) and to an aspect of assessment validity, that an assessment should be based on the performance of the knowledge, skills and qualities that are genuinely valued and not a reduced version of them such as might be required by a multiple-choice test.

However there is a further conception of assessment *as learning* which has negative connotations. This view emerges where assessment systems and tasks are seen as inauthentic and lacking in validity, where 'assessment masquerades as, or substitutes for, learning itself.' (Sadler, 2007, p.388). Torrance (2007) describes assessment *as learning* as 'the displacement of learning (i.e. understanding) by procedural compliance i.e. achievement without understanding'. In this perspective students and teachers are seen to focus on completing assessment tasks and attaining good marks to the detriment of real engagement with learning (Ecclestone, 1999).

Assessment for learning – an integrated model

A great deal of the considerable research, practice development and academic debate about assessment in HE in recent years draws on concepts related to assessment for learning. However, as the account of assessment for learning above might suggest, this often means a fragmented approach to assessment for learning with a narrow focus on one or two pertinent features. A number of assessment for learning models are developing towards a more holistic conception. One of these is

the work of the national Centre for Excellence (CETL¹) in Assessment for Learning at Northumbria University. This assessment for learning model has developed from a significant foundation of empirical research on the students' experience of assessment (Sambell, McDowell & Brown, 1997), interrogating the powerful messages that assessment conveys to students and their responses (Sambell & McDowell, 1998). Additionally, we have drawn on a wide range of research and theoretical resources in educational assessment more broadly.

Our model of assessment for learning is characterised by a feedback-rich learning environment that has formative assessment at its core with the intention of enabling all students to enhance their achievements. The notion of feedback is expanded to include not only the 'normal' tutor feedback on student work but also tutor-student dialogic feedback which is part of interactive teaching and learning and peer feedback from a range of formal and informal collaborative learning activities. This interaction enables students to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their own work, rather than simply expecting tutors to do that job for them.

By engaging students as active participants in learning activities and feedback, we induct them into the requirements of their discipline or professional area of study enabling them to understand and subsequently, interrogate and challenge the standards, outcomes, and criteria used for the evaluation of high quality work. Social learning, collaborative inquiry and group discussion are valued and promoted and students increasingly take control of their own learning and its evaluation. These capabilities, where students direct their own learning, evaluate their own progress and attainments and support the learning of others are at the heart of autonomous learning and of the graduate qualities valued by employers and in professional practice.

Assessment for learning provides for verification of student attainment without allowing this summative function to dominate learning and teaching. There will be 'summative-free zones' where learning (and teaching) can take place without some of the direct, negative backwash effects (Biggs, 1991) of assessment for grading. Students are offered opportunities to practice and rehearse skills and knowledge, to make mistakes and to learn collaboratively in a 'low stakes' context (Knight & Yorke, 2003). Assessment for learning challenges the often-voiced assumption that 'if there are no marks attached students won't do it' and enables productive learning to happen without the direct reward of marks or grades. It breaks the downward spiral where marks and grades are used to control student behaviour and, as a response, students deploy effort only when this will be directly rewarded by marks (Biggs, 1991). Here our assessment for learning model seeks to ensure that high-stakes summative assessment is used rigorously but sparingly, so that formative assessment can drive the learning offering students extensive opportunities to engage in the kinds of tasks that develop and demonstrate their learning, thus building their confidence and capabilities before they are summatively assessed.

Both summative and formative assessment must be well-constructed and designed and there may in fact be considerable slippage between the two within the learning environment (Taras, 2008). The assessment strategy must employ a diversity of methods to assess genuine and valued learning. Views of assessment as 'measurement' of capability have left us with a legacy of assessment methods which are excellent for the purpose of producing numerical marks and differentiating between students. These methods are normally of much less value in developing and evaluating authentic and worthwhile performances of understanding, application, creativity and commitment. Assessment for learning requires appropriate assessment tasks - methods which stimulate and evaluate worthwhile

¹ CETL Assessment for Learning is one of 72 centres of excellence established by the Higher Education Funding Council for England in 2005

learning through the assessment process and foster the capabilities and dispositions for learning in professional and personal life beyond graduation.

The diagram illustrates the CETL Assessment for Learning model in a form that it is used to stimulate review and development of assessment practice.



Fig 1 Cetl Assessment for learning model

Conclusion

Assessment for learning has been developing over a considerable period of time and continues to develop though sometimes in varying ways in different sectors of education. It remains a contested concept with different models being promulgated. However we are now at a point in higher education where we can begin to draw together the various strands of assessment for learning and create a more integrated whole that can offer useful and coherent guidance for the practice of assessment in support of student learning.

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