

Assessment

'Assessment is, indeed, the bridge between teaching and learning.'

Dylan Wiliam

The word 'assessment' comes from the Latin 'to sit alongside'. Now, it is not realistic for us to sit alongside every pupil. But it does have something to tell us about how we might think about assessment – that it is the process of gaining insight into what our pupils know, understand and can do as a result of what we have taught them. In doing this, we will have greater insight into what appears to have been learnt, what needs to be consolidated or revisited and where the gaps are.

If the purpose of robust curriculum planning is to ensure that pupils are taught the demanding aspects of a topic, then checking whether they have got it needs to be done through assessment. There are formal and informal ways of doing this. Not all results of assessment instruments need to be captured on spreadsheets or other documents. But whether documented formally or not, the information should be fine-tuning the next stages in learning.

At its lightest touch, assessment can be done through talk. In fact, I would argue that assessment for learning involves high-quality conversations about learning and then acting on that information. Dylan Wiliam, whose work was instrumental in driving assessment for learning in schools, said 'responsive teaching' is one side of the coin: I have taught something and I need to know

whether my pupils have 'got it' and to what depth? The information I gain from this light-touch assessment will determine where the learning and the work go next. It is through the 'to and fro' of questioning conversations in the classroom that I know not only whether pupils have completed something, but whether they have understood and are able to apply it in different contexts. There are very effective ways of developing this across a class – the work done by Alex Quigley¹ on techniques such as A, B, and C. The teacher asks a question, one pupil gives an answer (A) a second pupil builds on it (B) and a third either contradicts or contributes (C). Building this kind of structure during lessons, with no hands up, so that any child, within reason,² can be asked a question without warning, ensures that all are kept on their toes, and have to listen to one another's answers in order to be able to contribute. If, as a result of doing something like this, I find that pupils are able to respond with A and B but have less to either contradict or make further contributions, then I will realise that there is more to do. Conversely, if all seem secure, then I will make the decision to move on. The second side of the assessment for learning coin is this: what pupils will do differently as a result of the feedback: how will they change their work and how will I know?

If the purpose of this light-touch assessment is to provide information about where to go next, then this is formative assessment. The critical thing is that it provides information about where the gaps are and also what can be celebrated, in terms of the distance travelled – so that we and our pupils are able to say we didn't know that before and now we do. And there is still this to be grappled with and understood. Whatever information is gathered and whatever feedback is given to pupils, the important thing is that they act on it.

Too much feedback is generic and imprecise, such as 'use more imaginative vocabulary in your writing.' Well, the pupil would have used more imaginative vocabulary if they'd known that more imaginative vocabulary was available. Without the prompts for the missing links, pupils are likely to be adrift. There is more on this in the chapter on feedback and marking.

More formal, but still low stakes assessments, are also part of the assessment process. For example, pupils sit vocabulary tests, times tables

¹ www.theconfidentteacher.com/2013/12/disciplined-discussion-easy-abc
² Caveat here: I would not call on a pupil if I knew they had been recently bereaved, for example. But I would check that they were paying attention.

tests and key terms recall, and all provide opportunities for checking whether something has been learnt. The most powerful way, identified by Dylan Wiliam, is for the results of these sorts of tests to be private to the pupil. They need to be reassured that there is no shame in getting things wrong, because, with practice, that is how we learn. It is in the process of trying to recall an answer that the learning, in other words, what is remembered, becomes stronger. Both multiple-choice and short-answer quizzes enhance later performance.³

It also appears that if we get an answer incorrect, our neural pathways are more sensitive to finding the correct answer. So, the paradox is that learning is often more powerful, albeit uncomfortable, when we get things wrong and search out the correct answer, than when we get something correct in the first place. If pupils know this, they are likely to persevere longer with knowing and remembering things. A further benefit of this light-touch but efficient way of assessing is that it demands revisiting. And it is the revisiting, over time, which secures the learning in the long-term memory.

A further benefit of assessment is that it is possible to see the distance travelled. It is deeply rewarding to see the difference in knowledge and proficiency at the start of a course or unit of work, as we make progress through it and at the end. When we consider examples like Austin's Butterfly, we can see that through careful critique and feedback, those basic attempts, refined and practised over time, become solid pieces of work. It was in the assessing, discussion and reworking that the impressive piece of work was produced. This would not have been possible without thoughtful, sensitive and robust assessment.

³ psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2F00000004

Feedback and marking

'The first fundamental principle of effective classroom feedback is that feedback should be more work for the recipient than the donor.'

Dylan Wiliam

High-quality feedback has always been fundamental to supporting pupil progress. However, it appears that marking has become a proxy for feedback and this has become a significant pressure point for teachers. The question needs to be asked, 'Who is this for?' The pressure to produce large amounts of written marking means that it is often done quickly, comments are superficial and 'next steps' are vague. Often, pupils are not sure how to improve their work because feedback such as 'use more technical vocabulary' is not exemplified. This means that pupils are likely to be confused about what they should include.

The problem with the focus on written feedback is that it appears to have trumped high-quality verbal feedback during lessons. While there might have been verbal feedback, some schools worry that there is no hard evidence that it has taken place. And as a result, teachers often

resort to verbal feedback stamps, to prove that they have spoken to the pupil about their work. This is a waste of time. In a desperate effort to prove that pupils are making progress, the marks and stamps in books and photos of practical work are used as devices to show others, not necessarily the children, that feedback has been given. The problem here is that the written feedback and the sundry stamps are often taken as proxies for progress. But they do not show that pupils have made progress, they only show that someone has made some marks on the paper.

However, feedback is important because it shifts the learning on, as long as pupils do something effective with the feedback. The question is, does it need to be written every time and how can progress be shown if not?

The most effective way to consider progress is to look at pupils' work and have discussions with them, over time. Have they improved over the last few weeks? Is there a direction of improvement? Is their work showing higher levels of nuanced language and understanding of the concepts and detail being taught? Are they getting better results in low stakes quizzes on the essentials they need to know? Are they able to talk about what they know, understand and can do? These are authentic ways of checking progress, because they reside in the products and speech of pupils.

A further problem with trying to prove progress is that it assumes that learning happens in a linear fashion. We know that it doesn't. In fact, we often need to forget things, revisit them, get things wrong, correct them, for deep learning to take place. This happens when there is high-quality discussion about what makes good work and pupils have the chance to draft, and if necessary, redraft their work. So, while it is not necessary to check every piece of work, every day, it is possible to skim books and to pull out the key points which a number of pupils are still getting wrong. These misconceptions and mistakes are the platform for new learning, as the teacher revisits these at the start of the next lesson. A quick note on a grid will highlight those areas which are secure and a cause for celebration, and those where there are gaps, which need to be revisited. Not only does this save time, it is more effective in terms of moving learning on, of providing honest feedback and securing deeper progress, over time.

Excessive focus on marking books mean that other things do not get done. Things that make a difference to learning, such as planning. So, what can be done to square the circle? First, let's ask who the marking is for. If it

is for accountability to senior leaders and inspectors, then the question is why? Ofsted has produced clarification on expectations here. It makes it clear that Ofsted does not expect to see a particular frequency or quantity of work in pupils' books or folders. Nor does it expect to see unnecessary or extensive written dialogue between teachers and pupils in exercise books and folders. Ofsted recognises the importance of different forms of feedback and inspectors will look at how these are used to promote learning.

There are three references to marking in the Ofsted Inspection Handbook.¹ The first reference places marking in the context of what constitutes teaching, the second in terms of evaluating learning over time and the third is in the criteria for outstanding quality of teaching. It might be helpful to consider the second two references to marking and think through implications for schools. Para 183, 'Evaluating learning over time', says that direct observation of lessons needs to be supplemented by other evidence to enable inspectors to evaluate what teaching is like typically and the impact that teaching has had on pupils' learning over time. So this additional information includes: the school's own evaluations of the quality of teaching and its impact on learning, discussions with pupils about the work they have undertaken, what they have learned from it and their experience of teaching and learning over longer periods, discussion about teaching and learning with teachers, teaching assistants and other staff and the views of pupils, parents and staff. Also a scrutiny of pupils' work, with particular attention to whether marking, assessment and testing are carried out in line with the school's policy and whether they are used effectively to help teachers improve pupils' learning. There is also a focus on the level of challenge provided, and whether pupils have to grapple appropriately with content, not necessarily 'getting it right' first time, which could be evidence that the work is too easy. And finally looking at pupils' effort and success in completing their work and the progress they make over a period of time.

¹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-from-september-2015

So there's a raft of evidence to consider. Why, then, the focus on volumes of marking? It's much healthier to think of marking as feedback which supports progress over time. Evidence of progress over time is much more powerful than over-marking, which goes nowhere. Sensible feedback and marking policies state clearly what the purpose and rationale for these are; they recognise that one size does not fit every subject or key stage and encourage colleagues to think creatively about gathering evidence of progress. There are some schools that are thinking hard about the impact of marking. Andrew Percival has written about his school's approach to marking.² Drawing on the research³ on marking, he and his colleagues asked themselves whether the quality of the feedback was as good as it could be; whether the pupils were taking responsibility for their own learning and whether the pressures of marking meant that teachers did not have time to do other, more worthwhile activities. These are important questions which everyone in school should be asking. They removed the expectation for written comments in books. However, the books are checked quickly and common strengths, mistakes and misconceptions are shared with the whole class at the start of the next lesson. First, this has far greater impact and second, it saves teachers' time.

And the logical extension to this is comparative judgement.

² primarypercival.weebly.com/blog/no-written-marking-job-done
³ A summary of the research on marking by Adam Boxer: achemicalorthodoxy.wordpress.com/2018/02/18/markaggedon/#more-2134