

Section B: Embedding Formative Assessment

Unit 1: So what are the pupils doing?

Presentation notes

Slide 1

This seminar presentation has been developed to encourage teachers who have been working on their own approach to classroom assessment. Its aim is to provoke reflection on what it means to say and show that formative assessment is being embedded in everyday classroom practice.

Slide 2

This slide uses the AifL triangle to introduce the overall purpose of the work covered in the presentation. Assessment is presented as an activity that, as well as measuring learning, has the potential to improve significantly the quality of learning and teaching. In developing the use of assessment in this way, we need to think about the purposes and principles involved as well as the changes in practice that could be required. The four sessions are designed to explore these in a coherent and progressive way.

Session 1

Principles for teaching and learning

Slide 3

Perhaps the first thing to stand out in this statement is that assessment is presented not as something that follows a piece of learning but as an essential and integral part of the learning process.

Participants can use this as the starting point for a brief period of initial reflection on what they hope to take away from the seminar. Ask them to think about what the statement says about classroom assessment as a moment of learning and, in the light of this, to write down one or two things they would like to improve their understanding of by the end of the seminar. If there's time, this could be used as the starting point for a short Think, Pair, Share session. It could also be

restricted to individual reflection at this point but then used as the focus for a final plenary activity to evaluate seminar outcomes. In both cases, it would provide a practical example of the role of reflection in self-assessment.

Slide 4

The first session in this presentation provides an opportunity to think about the implications for everyday classroom practice of the four principles used in the Highland Council Reflection Framework to underpin the effective use of formative assessment: participation, dialogue, engagement and thinking. These principles are introduced on the next slide and are further discussed in a paper produced by Mark Priestley to accompany the Highland Council Reflection Framework.

Slide 5

These four principles can be introduced in a number of ways. The activity sheet sets them out as they appear here: participation set opposite engagement and dialogue against thinking. The activity is designed to encourage reflection on the extent to which everyday teaching and learning activities can be developed to provide opportunities to practise these principles.

Slide 6

Activity 1

This activity can be developed as a practical example of Think, Pair, Share. First, establish groups of at least six participants. Next ask everyone to gather some thoughts about their own experience of using the strategy and the extent to which it allowed them to practice some aspects of any or all of the four principles. After a couple of minutes, ask two (or three) group members to join up and share their thoughts. Then encourage the whole group to share ideas

and try to reach a common view which can contribute to a whole group summing up at the end.

Slide 7

This slide provides a conclusion that might hopefully come from this discussion.

Participation can't really happen without the teacher deliberately encouraging it. Extensive evidence of meaningful dialogue, teacher and pupil, pupil and pupil, pupil and teacher is likely to be a particularly strong feature. Pupils' greater engagement in their own learning will constitute an important outcome, and thinking by all the participants in relation to all aspects of classroom activity will be a common feature.

This emphasises the importance of thinking in any activity aimed at making progress in learning.

Session 2

Classroom assessment and better learning

Slide 8

The second session in this presentation begins to develop a view about assessment as focusing not just on measuring learning but on improving it. The starting point for this lies in the suggestion that, to be effective, formative assessment is not so much about improving the quality of teaching as it is about giving learners the tools they need to better engage with their own learning.

Slide 9

Early experience of formative assessment strategies often leads to their being identified with good teaching generally. Unfortunately, this may become a barrier to real engagement with the principles and the potential rewards that can arise from a more complete understanding of why formative assessment is both a powerful force in raising standards and a challenge to existing classroom practice.

This slide aims to prompt closer thinking about whether or not we can classify formative assessment as being good teaching alone. The focus on assessment might suggest that it's actually about good assessment and in particular, it's about developing self-assessment by pupils as a crucial component. The final question about what the pupils are doing is a challenging acid test for anyone.

Slide 10

Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam address these three questions in *Inside the Black Box*. To each question, they found evidence to support a positive answer. In each case, the nature of the answer is indicated in the short extract from *Inside the Black Box* following each question on the slide.

This poses an obvious problem: if there is evidence telling us that formative assessment improves attainment and other evidence then tells us that we don't use it as well as we could, we need to explore how its use can be improved. The answer Black and Wiliam provide to the third of these questions offers an insight into what their research has to tell us about the factors likely to have most impact on our efforts.

Slide 11

These are the three areas Black and Wiliam identified as being essential if we are to improve how we use formative assessment in the classroom. They are in the order in which they are presented in *Inside the Black Box*.

The first two are about engaging and involving pupils in their own learning. The last is about improving teaching to achieve this and the order in which they have been presented may be a useful discussion point when beginning to think about how formative assessment can be embedded in classroom practice. Clearly, Black and Wiliam do not see improved teaching as an end in itself, however valuable. The real power of formative assessment lies in engaging and involving pupils in regulating

their learning. Understanding that this is likely to have profound implications for existing classroom practice and considering how to address them is probably the most significant thing in distinguishing formative assessment from the more general skills we might associate with good teaching.

The first area - improving the self-esteem of pupils - is really about the beliefs pupils (and teachers) bring to their learning (and teaching). If pupils believe that they have only a fixed amount of intelligence to work with, then they are not likely to set much store by effort: if something is difficult, then it's probably beyond what they can cope with so it's not worth trying to find another solution. On the other hand, if they believe they can get smarter by trying harder, then there's an incentive to redouble their efforts. Similarly, teachers need to decouple 'being bright' from 'doing better' and focus their own and their pupils attention on effort as being the main thing when it comes to improvement. These bedrock beliefs need to be addressed if formative assessment is to have real impact.

The second area - improving self-assessment by pupils - is the means through which formative assessment will have greatest impact. There are challenges here. More than anywhere else, this is about surrendering control. If pupils are to be more involved in assessing themselves, this responsibility can only come from teachers (and schools) who feel able to loosen the reins. Again, there is room for interesting discussion here, not least about the extent to which surrendering control empowers not just pupils but also teachers because of the resulting new relationship that emerges between them.

The third area covers the things that we tend to dwell on when thinking about assessment for learning: sharing learning intentions and success criteria, using questions and dialogue, giving feedback. Usually, we think about them as strategies that can improve the quality of teaching; we need also to think

about them as assessment strategies pupils can be trained to use through peer assessment.

Slide 12

This seems to be the most important issue of all for Black and Wiliam. Do all pupils come to their learning with the belief that they can improve through their own efforts? Teachers can exercise a powerful influence over whether they do but that in turn depends on the values they hold about, for example, intelligence and learning. Some believe intelligence is fixed at birth, others that it can be improved through effort. Some believe that learning is about the transmission of knowledge, others that it occurs through interaction and exploration. Many hold beliefs that lie somewhere between the two extremes.

Research tells us that, if students understand that their own efforts are more important than any innate ability, provided these efforts are well informed and supported, all can succeed. The next activity provides an opportunity to think about the beliefs teachers bring into the classroom.

Slide 13

Activity 2

This activity explores the beliefs and dispositions teachers bring in to their classrooms. Its aim is not to set out clear contrasts between the two extremes reflected in the statements but to think more closely about the impact that a teacher's beliefs (whatever they may be) can have on what happens in the classroom.

Slide 14

This slide looks at the shift in the balance between learning and teaching needed if formative assessment is to be embedded in everyday classroom practice. It explores the findings published in 1989 by D Royce Sadler into the essential characteristics of formative assessment. The idea of perceiving a gap and taking steps to close it illustrates the importance of the involvement of the learner. It makes it clear why a

teacher cannot do the learning for a pupil. That has to be the pupil's job: the teacher needs to concentrate on stimulating a desire to learn and then supporting the process.

Session 3 The evolution of good teaching

Slide 15

This session begins to look at those aspects of assessment for learning that are most likely to have an impact on everyday teaching practice. It presents them in a different way in order to refocus attention on why different strategies might be useful additions to classroom practice.

Slide 16

If formative assessment is really about enabling learning by removing barriers preventing pupils' access to it and then developing their capacity for self-assessment, then we may need to rethink how we approach the four aspects of classroom practice we tend to associate with assessment for learning: sharing learning intentions and success criteria; using questions; giving feedback; using peer and self-assessment.

If the development of self-assessment is the ultimate objective, peer assessment opportunities in the classroom will provide the training ground and teaching practices and procedures need to model in a meaningful way what's involved. It may help therefore to think about practice not as collections of strategies under four headings but as three essential aspects of practice if classroom assessment is to become an integral part of learning and teaching.

This slide explores how that can be placed within the framework set out by D Royce Sadler (1989) and which is now seen as a defining account of the steps involved in using formative assessment.

Slide 17

If we now look at these three aspects of classroom planning and practice which will need to be satisfied if assessment is to move closer to the heart of teaching (and learning), we can begin to see the potential benefits arising from a shift of emphasis away from a strategies-based approach to formative assessment, towards one which requires some reflection on the principles underpinning the practice.

Slide 18

This slide presents this aspect of assessment for learning as an outcome from research studies with implications for teaching practice, and finally provides some practical examples of how it may be applied. The aim of this is to suggest that while strategies and tactics are important in giving evidence gathered from research some practical application, being clear about underlying purposes is a higher priority which will inevitably shape the nature of that application. The next two slides follow a similar format.

WALT - We are learning to(day); WILF - What I'm looking for; OLI - Our learning intention; TIB - This is because

Slide 19

This slide begins to develop an interpretation of feedback that works in two ways. Not only do teachers give pupils feedback to help them build on where they are now, they must also get feedback from pupils to stay in touch with where that is. In other words, dialogue in the classroom is an important way of gathering evidence of learning. Asking better questions and asking questions better are both important in this.

Slide 20

Many lessons have emerged from research into the nature of feedback that will help pupils to improve. Perhaps the most important is that it should be specific and focused on what needs to be done next to close the gap, wherever it may be. That makes a direct connection with whatever

learning purpose the activity was designed to achieve. Another important consideration seems to be guidance on how the improvement might be made.

www.ebi - What went well... even better if... (used by some with older pupils)

Slide 21

Activity 3

There are several help sheets to support this activity. 'Exploring formative assessment' is a starter, offering different ways of exploring formative assessment. The three aspects are as they are described in this presentation. Other sheets dedicated to each of these aspects of formative assessment have also been provided. Participants with more experience of formative assessment could use them to reflect on their own reasons for using particular approaches.

Session 4

Self-assessment in practice

Slide 22

This session uses the three aspects of formative assessment discussed in the previous section to begin to explore how pupils can be trained to take much more responsibility for their own learning.

Slide 23

This element of the embedding and extending model used throughout the Highland Council Reflection Framework provides a visual organizer. It brings together the three aspects of formative assessment through which teachers can develop a more meaningful role for assessment in everyday classroom practice.

This slide could be used to draw together some of the lessons/ideas that have emerged from the previous section as a precursor to a more specific consideration of self-assessment.

Slide 24

This slide encapsulates the argument provided in this presentation: that if we are

looking for evidence that formative assessment is being embedded in classroom practice, we should look not at what teachers are doing but at how their classroom practice is helping pupils to take more responsibility for their own learning through self-assessment. Encouraging better thinking on the part of pupils has a valuable role to play in this.

Slide 25

This slide takes Black and Wiliam's idea that self-assessment by pupils is not a luxury but an essential part of formative assessment and presents a practical context in which pupils' capacity to assess themselves can be presented as the real purpose behind a teacher's use of formative assessment. As with previous slides, self-assessment by pupils is presented as an outcome from research studies with implications for teaching practice. Finally, some examples of how it may be applied are suggested.

Slide 26

The quotation in this slide offers a discussion point around the difficulties many teachers find in questioning and developing their own approaches and practices. It's not peculiar to teachers. Resistance to change ranging from active resistance (no chance!) to passive accommodation (I'm doing that anyway) is common in all professions and none.

One starting point in the process is to think of the benefits a change may offer and the quotation provides an opportunity to reflect on that. The contrast between a well-managed classroom and a transformation seeking one can be explored by thinking about the possible differences between a classroom where the objective is good teaching and another where it is good learning.

Slide 27

Activity 4

Teachers who begin to reflect seriously on their own practice often discover that there are many ways in which even minor

improvements can help pupils take quite dramatic steps forward in their learning. Knowing where to start can be a problem but various evaluation tools can help. This activity offers an opportunity to use some of the more readily available instruments. The appendix of The Highland Council Assessment is for Learning policy contains a general audit tool. Self-assessment sheets are also provided in the Assessment is for Learning Self-assessment Toolkit published by Learning and Teaching Scotland. In addition, this unit in The Highland Council Learning and Teaching Reflection Framework incorporates a school self-evaluation tool which can be used to examine local approaches to peer and self-assessment in particular.

Slide 28

Quite a lot of recent evidence shows that a potentially effective way of embarking on a change process involves these four elements. They offer an effective way to apply the four principles underpinning the Highland Council Reflection Framework to teachers' learning. Personal reflection and critical review require thoughtful engagement: learning communities depend on participation in open dialogue and action research brings all four together in a practical development process.

Dylan Wiliam's recent work on Teacher Learning Communities (TLCs) is a good example of this. The use of associated schools groups within the AifL programme is another. Both offer a realistic context for school-based developments.

Eric Young
September 2006

eric@itelligentclassrooms.co.uk