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The Challenge of Formative Assessment in Secondary Classrooms

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Over the years, the promotion of ABA (Achievement based assessment), Unit Standards implementation and ABeL (Assessment for Better Learning) contracts have seen the patchy development of assessment practice in schools or departments where there has been someone to champion the development. The advent of NCEA has shone the spotlight on assessment practice in secondary schools in a way that has never happened before because it is mandatory for all schools. There is nothing about NCEA that is dramatically new or different for some teachers because it incorporates many of the principles of good assessment practice. A good balance of formative and summative, clear criteria that can be used formatively and summatively, use of exemplars, fair moderation systems and strong links between learning outcomes and assessment tasks.

Over the last six years we have had the privilege of working with secondary teachers in an effort to maximise student learning gains through good assessment practice, and formative practices in particular. The schools have all been in Auckland and we have worked in some over two or three years. They have been co-ed and single sex, ranged through deciles one to ten and cater for the diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds that make up Auckland. We have worked with departments in all the learning areas and one-to-one with teachers from newly trained to very experienced. Our knowledge about what students want and think has come from group discussions with them in which we have talked about how they are affected by assessment practices

The developments have been based on a model that we have adapted and that has evolved from one originally articulated by Ruth Sutton in 1996. It includes teaching student how to self assess and teaching teachers how to set students up to succeed with their learning. It would be good to say we had all the answers, or even most of them, and we wish that were true. We have, however, learned some of the 'do's' and 'don'ts', as well as the order in which to approach some of the professional development issues, that will support successful school-wide implementation of assessment, including NCEA.

Regarding assessment in general, there have been a number of pitfalls we have uncovered and some potential blocks to progress that can be avoided or catered for if they are known in advance. These are -

- Some teachers are still of the mindset that the purpose of assessment is to find ways to find out what students don't know and this might mean designing assessments to 'trap' or 'trick' them. These teachers have great difficulty accepting the validity of good assessment practices that aim to make the process as transparent as possible.
- Some teachers do not know their curriculum documents, do not have copies of them and are unclear about the difference between achievement objectives and learning outcomes. Teachers who are not clear about the learning outcomes have difficulty planning for teaching and learning activities and even more difficulty planning for meaningful assessment.
- Some teachers don't plan. Others work directly from a scheme or overview, or, plan from lesson to lesson. These approaches make for a very haphazard approach to assessment. Assessment needs to be planned at the time that the unit of work is planned.
- Teachers who do not have a good understanding of the principles (at least) or the theory (ideally) of assessment have difficulty making good decisions about what to assess and how to assess it.
- Many teachers, when developing assessment criteria, are unclear about what they are assessing and it is, more often than not, something other than the quality of the work. Students are often asked to set goals that are behavioural rather than learning related. They are often asked to check off a 'to do' list of tasks which may, or may not, have anything to do with the quality of their work.
- There is often confusion between formative and summative assessment practice even by teachers who know what the terms mean. Some summative assessment grades/marks are based on a series of small formative tasks. Some formative assessments are used summatively.
- There is frequently confusion between student self assessment of their own work and student evaluation of the teacher or the unit of work.
- Students need to be taught the skills of self assessment and are not good at it unless they have good instruction and opportunities to practice with feedback. Clear criteria are essential and the process needs to be structured for them.
- Teachers, parents and students are sometimes confused about the difference between effort, progress and achievement. This is manifest in feedback comments and in school report wording and scales. It is achievement that teachers find difficult to report on accurately and honestly.

- Some HODs do not realise that they have a leadership role in assessment. Some departments do not have banks of unit plans, assessment tasks and criteria, exemplars, common assessment tasks or moderation practices. It is common practice for teachers to take what they develop with them if they change schools and not to leave copies in the school in which they were developed.

With regard to formative assessment, in particular, the following are the greatest challenges

Giving feedback

All teachers will say they have trouble finding time to give students feedback. That is undoubtedly true, so what feedback they do give needs to be of a very high quality.

Feedback can be given orally or in writing. When done in writing, we have found that some students have difficulty understanding the points the teacher is trying to make, can't read the teachers writing, or do not process the feedback to the point that they know what to do next. Asking a student to tell you what they think you are trying to say to them is the best way to check this out

Ideally the giving of oral feedback becomes a discussion, rather than the teacher 'telling' the student what is needed. The skills of asking open-ended questions and guiding the student through the process will, in the long term, be more useful for them

The feedback should be specific and related to the criteria. There are still teachers who give general praise rather than detailed and specific comments about the quality of the work.

Students need feedback and feedforward. Feedback reflects on what they have done so far and feedforward tells them what they need to do next.

Even when a student has had good quality feedforward, or they have identified for themselves *what* they need to do to improve their work, they often have difficulty knowing *how* to go about it.

We have seen very effective feedback and feedforward being given to a whole class or to groups. There will need to be some individual follow-up as well but when issues apply to many students it is an effective use of time to deal with them class-wide.

Developing criteria

Teachers sometimes forget that the same criteria can be, and should be, used formatively through the teaching programme and for the final summative assessment. Students should have the criteria before they begin doing the assessment task so they can be guided by the criteria to produce quality work.

We have already seen teachers using the NCEA style of rubric with year nine and year ten students. The students find it very easy to work with and find it motivates them to want to improve. It also provides the framework, the language and the means for improvement.

Some teachers find it difficult to articulate all the criteria they use in the assessment of student work. There are often some that remain 'secret' to the teacher. We have been working on questioning techniques to help elicit these secret criteria and teachers frequently assure us that they 'explain' these criteria to their students during the teaching process. It is our observation that some teachers are unaware themselves of how they make their summative judgments until they go through the questioning process.

Presentation of information can be a real assessment trap. Teachers sometimes get into the habit of assessing presentation and giving significant grades/marks/credit for it without thinking about whether or not it is an appropriate learning outcome and, therefore, worthy of being assessed in the particular instance.

Student self assessment

In the long term this will be the most important skill because it empowers students to assess when they do not have access to a teacher for feedback. It is a complex and learned process that many adults find difficult so we should not expect students to be able to do it well without being taught, coached and given feedback.

There are many different things that they can self assess. Their behaviour, skills, completion of tasks, the content and/or the quality of their work. It is the latter that is the most difficult and the most important. We still see a lot of assessment of behaviour and of the process rather than of the quality of the work.

Many teachers get confused between a student self assessing their own work and getting a student to evaluate the lesson or the unit of work. We still see students being asked what they "liked" doing. This is not student self assessment. Nor is it good evaluation of the unit. At best, it might help the teacher understand if students were enjoying their learning. When teachers set a question for students to answer they need to ask themselves "who will learn what from the answer to this question?".

Self assessment needs to be against the criteria and not an exercise of giving oneself marks or grades. Some teachers tell us that students like to do this. The questions to ask are "what is the point?" and "what will the student learn about how to improve their work?" from a mark/grade.

Self assessment needs to happen throughout a unit of work, or towards the end, but not at the end of it. Students need to be given the opportunity to improve their work as a result of the self assessment and before they submit it for summative assessment. Some teachers have a mindset about the importance of

evaluating or assessing at the end. It is hardly, if ever, worth the time that is allocated for it. If time is an issue, and teachers always say it is, then we need to use what little time we have to the maximum advantage.

The self assessment process needs to be structured to guide the student through an evaluative process. Just leaving lines and asking for “student comments” is not enough. Guiding questions elicit more precise and more usable responses-

Something I have done well is

Something I need to improve is

My improvement action plan is

Using exemplars (or examples of good work)

Teachers often have difficulty thinking of ways they can provide these. There are many and varied types of exemplars, depending on the learning area. Getting another student to demonstrate a skill for sport or PE, having an overhead of the setting out of a mathematical process, keeping examples of work from a previous year for social studies or the teacher constructing a good paragraph with the class are but a few of many ways of using exemplars.

The important point for assessment is to ensure the exemplar is discussed in relation to the criteria.

We cannot expect students to comprehend what an excellent piece of work look like if they have never seen one.

Peer assessment

This is a complex area. We have watched teachers getting students to assess each other’s work. Sometimes it has been very effective but, more often than not, it has not been useful or worth the time involved. There is no doubt that there is great potential for this to be another very useful strategy for teachers to build into their programme. It relies, however, on the ability of students to have clear criteria, to make valid assessment judgments, and to have the confidence and skills to pass those on to a peer. We have learned that until a student can self assess, they will not be a skilled assessor for a peer. Until students are confident in the ability and the honesty of their peers they will not give credibility to, or place value on, the feedback.

The development of a cooperative learning culture in the classroom is the way to begin the development of this skill. Giving honest feedback needs to be accepted as a helpful and constructive thing to do.

Keeping assessment records

It is very easy for students to perceive assessment as something that gets done to them by teachers. If we want them to value the process as a means of self-

improvement, they need to be as fully involved in every aspect as possible. The assessment records are the property of the students, not of the teachers. Clearly teachers need to keep good records of summative data, and other information that will help them work with students and report accurately on their achievement, effort and progress. It is the student, however, who should, be using the assessment records, in an ongoing way, to assist motivation and improvement. Most primary and intermediate schools achieve this with assessment portfolios so there is a foundation for secondary schools to build on. Some are beginning to do this very successfully.

Involving parents in formative assessment

We have qualitative and quantitative data to demonstrate that the quality of student work improves when parents are involved in discussions with their children about their work and the assessment of it. Students are motivated to work harder when parents give them encouragement and show an interest in their efforts and achievement.

We are aware of the difficulties that some teachers experience, especially in the low-decile schools, in getting students to take things home and bring them back. What we have learned is that some teachers are able to get students to do this and others are not. It is similar to getting homework done. There are important strategies that teachers need to learn and implement consistently in order to successfully achieve this interaction with parents.

We have been invited to an international symposium on formative assessment this September in England. We are looking forward to working with academics and practitioners, from all over the western world, for whom formative assessment is an area of expertise. It will be a very timely and valuable opportunity to gain an understanding of how our experience sits with what is happening in secondary classrooms elsewhere. The advent of NCEA provides us with a special opportunity to improve our assessment practice and maximise the potential of assessment for better learning, as well as for qualifications.