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Assessment In History

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Summary of Contents

1. Implementing Formative Assessment To Enhance the Learning of History

Leonard Grech makes some important distinctions in this article, drawing our attention to the difference between assessment *for learning*, and the assessment *of learning*. It is a difference that many teachers forget, and consequently do not get the best from their pupils or their teaching. Reminding us that formative assessment necessitates the full participation of learners, and helps them to be actively involved Leonard uses the image of 'Ariadne's thread to save everyone from getting lost in a labyrinth of unnecessary details and trivialities'. It is an important reminder.

2. History Assessment in Greek Secondary Education

In this exploration of assessment in the Greek national examination and assessment system Vassiliki Sakka, a History Teacher, working in Athens, Greece provides an interesting insight into changes in Greek Upper Secondary Education (General and Vocational) assessment.

3. The *MATURA* Examination in History: External Assessment in Slovenia

In this article Dr Danijela Trškan explores the strengths and challenges of the History element of the Slovenian *Matura* examination, which is providing an accurate and reliable assessment of young people, but which does not always encourage and assess higher cognitive levels. Dr Trškan concludes that additional teacher set tasks are part of the solution, and looks forward to further developments in the national system.

4. The Assessment of The Results of History Teaching In The Czech Republic- Just One of The Cardinal Problems of the Czech Educational System

In Helena Mandelová's article we see a discussion of the pressures which modern societies place on History teaching and learning: the constant battle to justify historical study when politicians and society in general seeks vocational relevance. We see a strong argument for assessing more

carefully and precisely in order to demonstrate the value of History and in order to increase transferable skills and all round quality.

5. L'évaluation de l'épreuve d'Histoire au Baccalauréat français

Francis Maure's article in French, with contributions by Sylvie Bechert and Elaine Rémy explores the nature of the French Bacculaureate. A short summary in English has been added as article 5b. Very helpful insights into the approach taken by French teachers in assessment and grading, and a helpful summary of structural issues related to the 'Bac' are provided.

6. Epreuve du BAC session 2003

Marie-Cécile Bertiaux article about the French Bacculaureate concentrates on the 2003 work completed in relation to the Holocaust, and provides an interesting article about the French examination system and the work completed by French students. A synopsis in English follows the article.

7. Examinations in Denmark

In this short account Danish teacher Henrik Skovgaard Nielson provides a summary of the national system for examinations in Denmark and expresses some views about the strengths and shortcomings of the system. The Danish system is an interesting one, and offers some thought provoking contrasts to 'how we assess' elsewhere.

8. Is it Possible to Assess?

Raquel Pereira Henriques, writing from Portugal, raises some interesting questions about what History teachers can reasonably expect to achieve when they assess young people, but provides some suggestions in order to motivate, inspire and get the best from young people.

9. Instilling Memory Every Week: Assessing Teacher-Training Seminars on the Holocaust in Israel, 2000-2003

This article is about examining the effectiveness of subject specific teacher training, and Richelle Budd Caplan writes about Yad Vashem's work to evaluate the impact of Holocaust related teacher-training courses on Israeli teachers, providing some interesting insights into what changes teachers and impacts on their professional practice.

1.

Implementing Formative Assessment To Enhance the Learning of History

Leonard Grech

To most people the word assessment brings to mind tests and examinations as well as marks and grades. In other words, most people relate it to summative assessment which can also be referred to as assessment **of** learning.

Educationalists, however, are becoming more and more aware of the value of formative assessment or assessment **for** learning. This type of assessment is gaining ground even in Malta where the Educational Assessment Unit is working hard to promote it in all types of schools, whether Government, Church or Independent. It is crucial to recognise that the implementation of formative assessment in the classroom enhances learning, and thus leads to a raising of standards.

Formative assessment may be said to entail certain basic characteristics. First on the list is the **learning intention** or objective, which is intended to help the teacher and the learners to focus on a particular topic (content), skill or concept. Learning to identify 'the effects of the 1989 revolutions' or 'the long-term effects of the cold war' can be examples of learning intentions based on content. On other occasions the focus of the learning intention can be the acquisition of certain skills, which are considered basic to the learning of history. Examples of these learning intentions can be 'to retrieve information from a source', 'to compare sources', 'to find similarities and differences', 'to infer', 'to empathise', 'to distinguish layers of meaning', 'to differentiate between fact and opinion', 'to detect bias or propaganda', as well as 'to recognising deliberate ambiguity'.

Having a teacher with clear learning intentions in mind is good but not good enough. These have to be shared with the learners who need to know where the lesson is heading. Another step forward would be for the learners to be fully involved in the actual formulation of the learning intention itself. Formative assessment implies and presupposes the involvement and the active participation of learners as early as possible in the teaching and learning process. It was in view of all this that Mr Borg, a history teacher, formulated the following question after consultation with, and suggestions from his students. 'Compare

and contrast the immediate causes that led to the outbreak of World War 1, with those that led to the outbreak of World War 2.' Mr Borg was wise enough to realise that such consultation and negotiation may serve to motivate his students, raise their self-esteem and increase their efforts. All this definitely encourages students to produce work of a higher standard, particularly considering the fact that Mr Borg also discusses and negotiates with his students the criteria that is to be applied when evaluating the work. An awareness of the **success criteria** is necessary in order for the students themselves to know whether the learning intention has been achieved or not.

The students in Mr Borg's class feel confident discussing in groups issues such as 'The positive effects of the Crimean War on the Maltese population', or 'The effect of the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 on Maltese economy'. The reason for this confidence is clear. The students know quite clearly what is expected of them; for example they may be told to mention five or six positive or negative effects. They may also be told, for example, to choose one of the effects and write about it in detail. Sometimes Mr Borg also tells them the length that is expected from them. Not only do students find this very helpful, but as noted further down in this article, such practices also train them in self-assessment.

I think that by now it has been made quite clear that formative assessment is really nothing more but good pedagogy; an effective way to ensure that learning is taking place while the teacher continuously assesses the situation. No assessment can take place unless we ask questions. Teachers who are being trained in formative assessment have to develop an effective **questioning technique**. It is very easy to give the wrong message to students if all questions asked are based on recall. We have to plan our questions if we want them to be motivating and challenging enough. On certain occasions our questions may even be rather shocking particularly if our students tend to agree with everything we tell them.

Ms Camilleri-Smith really raised her students' eyebrows when she asked them whether or not they agreed with the statement that 'Milosovic's behaviour in Kosovo was tactful and acceptable'.

Such a statement made them think, analyse the question, discuss, speak their own mind and arrive at their own conclusions¹. These are skills which our students need to develop if they are to become independent learners. Our students are not containers to be filled up, but rather fires to be ignited. This is what Ms Camilleri-Smith felt she was doing when she asked her students if they think Nato's military actions in Yugoslavia in 1999 were justified or unjustified. Moreover she could feel the shocking effect on her students when she asked them to react to the following statement:

'The invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was inevitable.'

Asking questions is a skill which all teachers have to develop. How many of us, for example, are aware of what is called the 'wait-time'? Very often we ask questions in class and expect an immediate answer without giving our students time to understand the question, to think about it, and to form an opinion. Moreover, there are students who do form an opinion but find it difficult to express themselves. Perhaps we should always remember the maxim that before we teach Latin to John we have to know John. This brings us to the issue of differentiability because we need to be fully aware of the fact that learners have different strengths and weaknesses and moreover that they learn in different ways. This means that we cannot stick to one method of teaching. Indeed variety is the spice of life. So in the classroom we have to adopt different strategies so as to cater for the different needs of learners.

Feedback is yet another basic ingredient of formative assessment. Through the students' answers to questions, and through the learners' work and difficulties, the teacher is able to know whether students are making progress. Such feedback helps teachers to adapt their teaching methods to the situation. If need be the teacher may have to repeat using a different teaching method. As far as possible no-one should be allowed to fall by the wayside. Unfortunately too many injuries are left unattended.

There is another form of feedback which is equally important. It is the feedback the teacher gives to the learner. Stefan was asked to answer at length and in an essay form the following question: Discuss how successful or unsuccessful the League of Nations was during the 1920s? Stefan mentioned some of the successes such as the work carried out in order to reduce yellow fever, leprosy and malaria, the help offered to refugees from World War 1 to return to their homes, and the settlement of border disputes as in the case of

¹ Of course one should be fully aware of the fact that there are risks involved in letting learners think for themselves, especially when dealing with very sensitive topics such as the Holocaust. There is always the possibility that learners come to 'undesirable' conclusions. Here one must point out, however, that giving ample space to students is not tantamount to refraining from guiding them. On the other hand one cannot impose one's views on learners.

the Greek invasion of Bulgaria in 1925. Then Stefan went on to mention some of the failures, choosing the invasion of Vilna by Poland in 1920 and the occupation of Corfù by the Italians in 1923.

On reading the essay the teacher felt that Stefan had left out many important points, he did not express himself clearly, and moreover he failed to answer the question per se because all Stefan did was to write a short paragraph on each of the points mentioned above without forming a coherent argument. The teacher was truly disappointed and gave Stefan the following feedback.

This work is not up to standard. I'm sure you can do much better. If you produce similar answers during examinations, you will definitely fail.

This type of feedback is not helpful at all. The teacher is completely ignoring the good points mentioned in the answer (so there is no element of encouragement), and moreover is not providing any practical tips as to how Stefan may improve his work. It would have been much more beneficial had the teacher praised Stefan for his effort, mentioning the correct aspects of the essay, while at the same time pointing out that certain other relevant points had been left out, such as the question of Upper Silesia and that of Aaland Islands in 1921 (these are considered successes of the League), and the war between Greece and Turkey between 1920-22 as well as the question of The Ruhr in 1923 (these are considered to be failures of the League). It would have also been very helpful for Stefan to know that he was supposed to argue and arrive at some sort of a conclusion rather than present a number of paragraphs which were almost disjointed.

Indeed it has rightly been pointed out that teachers spend a great amount of time correcting children's work without, however, giving adequate feedback which can serve as scaffolding to the student. This is a pity and it goes against the spirit of formative assessment which aims to raise learners' standards including those who are underachieving.

Another basic ingredient of formative assessment is **peer-assessment**. Maria and Jason volunteered to talk to their classmates about the 1956 invasion of Hungary. They knew that their peers would evaluate their performance. Everyone agreed, however, that first of all there should be a consensus about the success criteria. Maria and Jason were told (a) to speak for 15 to 20 minutes (b) to speak clearly and project their voice because the use of the microphone was prohibited (c) to captivate the interest of the audience, that is their classmates, and (d) to make use of maps, photographs and other teaching material they deem fit.

They were also told to cover the following aspects of the event:

- the influence in Satellite states of Khrushchev's speech criticising Stalin's method
- events in Yugoslavia and Poland which might have influenced what was to happen in Budapest
- the real causes for the October 1956 uprising in Budapest
- aspirations of the insurgents
- the part played by Imre Nagy and how his actions might have speeded up the invasion
- what actually happened in the streets of Budapest
- the disappointment of the Hungarian people who felt that they were let down by the United States
- the consequences of the invasion. What happened afterwards.

Maria and Jason agreed to give due importance to the concepts of 'cause and effect' and 'change and continuity'. Knowing what was expected of them made it easier for Maria and Jason to prepare the talk. It also made things easier for their classmates when they came to criticise the delivery. The feedback provided was in fact really helpful. Everyone felt that the whole exercise, which presented the opportunity of playing the part of student and teacher at the same time was a great experience. Having the success criteria, moreover, put Maria and Jason in a position to assess their own performance. This is of great educational value, and in fact acquiring the skill of **self-assessment** is a basic principle of formative assessment.

17 year-old Alexander is covering a special topic dealing with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. He realised that he could answer (although with great difficulty) a question about the historical, geographical, ethnic, religious and linguistic similarities and differences among the three Baltic nations. However, he would prefer something simpler such as, for example, a narrative question dealing with the invasion of Vilna by Poland in 1920. He would be even more confident if the question were presented in a structured form. Had he still been in the Primary school, he would have given the 'green light' to such a question, meaning he knew the subject and could move on to another aspect of the topic. Alexander realised, however, that he was at a loss when faced with an argumentative question such as:

How far is it appropriate or out of place to compare the British 'occupation' of Ireland with the Russian 'occupation' of the Baltic countries?

Alexander knows also that he is not confident at all when it comes to comparing and contrasting. So he could not cope when presented with the following question in Maltese history:

Compare and contrast the Sette Giugno riots of 1919 with those of April 1958.

It is quite obvious that Alexander still lacks the skills involved in analysing events, presenting an argument, and arriving at certain conclusions. Even so, up to a certain extent he is lucky because he knows his own strengths and weaknesses, and with the help of his tutor he is developing the skills necessary to answer difficult argumentative questions such as the above. Alexander is being guided to master one of the key competencies, namely the ability to learn how to learn. He is finding himself more involved and in greater control of his own learning.

Indeed, formative assessment necessitates the full participation of learners. This is a very good start for them in becoming active citizens (incidentally 2005 is the year of Citizenship through Education). There is another aspect of formative assessment. Teachers who implement it realise that they become better teachers, knowing where their students stand and where they can potentially arrive. The learning intentions can be Ariadne's thread to save everyone from getting lost in a labyrinth of unnecessary details and trivialities. The other features of formative assessment, moreover, can help us to keep on track, and in time to become skilful enough to know when to accelerate or when to apply the brakes.

**Leonard Grech,
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