

## Excerpts from:

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### ***Creating Communities of Shared Practice: The challenges of assessment use in learning and teaching***

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#### **Introduction**

Current key debates in the field of educational assessment centre around the research evidence that suggests assessment, as a regular element in classroom work, holds the key to better learning (Black & William, 1998a; Broadfoot *et al.*, 2001; Shepard, 2000). Moreover, it is assessment used in the right way, as part of teaching to support and enhance learning, that has the most significant impact (Black & William, 1998a; Broadfoot *et al.*, Shepard, 2000). Therefore, teachers and researchers in the field of assessment have a strong professional interest in evaluating their own practice in line with current thinking and what constitutes effective educational assessment at the classroom level. These debates and commentaries on educational assessment also put forward a distinction between *assessment of learning* (assessment for the purposes of grading and reporting with its own established procedures) and *assessment for learning* (assessment whose purposes is to enable students, through effective feedback, to fully understand their own learning and the goals they are aiming for). Therefore, to improve learning and indeed teaching, assessment must be formative in both function and purpose and must put the student at the centre of the assessment process.

#### **Key Ideas from Recent Research**

##### *Assessment for Learning*

Shepard (2000) suggests that earlier testing and assessment perspectives were underpinned by a "highly consistent theoretical framework in which conceptions of 'scientific measurement' were closely aligned with traditional curricula and beliefs about learning" (p. 4). This assessment framework, however, is no longer compatible with teaching or with learning in present-day classrooms. Such an assessment framework does not fit with an emergent constructivist paradigm of teaching, learning and assessment. In such a paradigm, the model of learning underpinning assessment changes dramatically. Assessment practice therefore becomes more student-centred, and teachers' own assessments of students' understanding sit alongside peer and self-assessment as central parts of the social processes "that mediate the development of intellectual abilities, construction of knowledge and formation of students' identities" (Shepard, 2000, p. 4).

Thus, assessment is now defined and seen as an integral aspect of the teaching and learning cycle (Biggs, 1996; Hattie & Jaeger, 1998). Rather than being an event that describes

students' typical performance at the end of a course or period of learning, it is a fundamental process that describes students' best performance across time and uses a range of methods to capture evidence of best performance. These methods range from tests and examinations, performance assessments such as practical and oral demonstrations of learning, teacher or classroom-based assessment, portfolios of work and student self-assessment (Gipps, 1994). Such assessment is formative in both function and purpose and provides useful feedback to the teacher about how to modify teaching and learning activities.

The vital links between assessment, learning and teaching are recognised by many teachers and researchers (Black & William, 1998a; 1998b; Crooks, 1988; Harlen & James, 1997; Torrance & Pryor, 1995). Black & William (1998b) illustrate these links in their review of the literature on teachers' assessment practices. They argue that there is strong evidence to show that improving formative assessment as it stands within classrooms could be improved. The identified five key ways to improve formative assessment:

- (1) Feedback to any student should relate to the qualities of the work with advice on what the student can do to improve and should avoid comparisons with other students.
- (2) Students should be trained in self-assessment so that they can understand the main purposes of their learning and thereby grasp what they need to do to achieve.
- (3) Opportunities for students to express their understanding should be designed into any piece of teaching, for this will initiate the interaction whereby formative assessment aids learning.
- (4) The dialogue between students and a teacher should be thoughtful, reflective. Focused to evoke and explore understanding and conducted so that all students have an opportunity to think and to express their ideas.
- (5) Tests and homework exercises can be an invaluable guide to learning, but the exercises must be clear and relevant to learning aims. The feedback on them should give each student guidance on how to improve, and each must be given opportunity and help to work at the improvement.

In moving on from Black & William's work, further recent commentary suggests that formative assessment, under the title, *Assessment for Learning*, is distinguished by the following characteristics (Assessment Reform Group, 1999, pp. 6-7):

- Embedded in a view of teaching and learning of which it is an essential part;
- Involves sharing learning goals with students;
- Aims to help students know and to recognise the standards they are aiming for;
- Involves students in self-assessments;
- Provides feedback which leads to students recognising their next steps and how to take them;
- Is underpinned by confidence that every student can improve;
- Involves both teacher and students reviewing and reflecting on assessment data.

To include and promote such assessment practices in present-day classrooms requires a major shift in how learning is viewed, how students' own learning is understood and how assessment is integrated into teaching practices.

## *Communities of Shared Practice*

To achieve a deep as opposed to a surface approach to learning (Entwistle, 1987) it is important that teachers provide contexts and opportunities within their assessment practice for students to become aware of their own learning strategies and to take more responsibility for them. In a pedagogical approach, learners are encouraged to be independent in their learning and to develop metacognitive skills. 'Metacognition' is a term used to describe our knowledge about how we perceive, remember, think and act; that is what we know about what we know (Metcalfe & Shimamura, 1994). It is suggested that our pedagogical practices are situated within the emergent constructivist paradigm with its associated theories of learning that view learners as actively engaged in constructing their meaning from their learning experiences, actively making sense of new knowledge and deciding how to integrate with previously held concepts and information. The teacher intervenes in this ongoing process of knowledge construction. In this way teachers and students work together in the knowledge construction process and teachers empower students through the assessment process by providing them with assessment opportunities that develop their learning and metacognition (Hendry, 1996). As constructive educators we attempt, therefore, to create learning environments that have the following characteristics:

- The teacher is a facilitator of learning.
- Students are encouraged to demonstrate their learning.
- The teacher provides students with opportunities to peer or self-evaluate.
- Group and pair work is encouraged.
- Student-teacher dialogue about the student's learning is fundamental.
- Support and collaboration are consistently available.

Therefore, through our own pedagogical practices we wish to create for our own students a general idea of what constitutes the practice of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1996), specifically in relation to what constitutes the community is participation in the assessment process, where participation, as a way of learning, enables the student to both absorb, and be absorbed in, the 'culture of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1996, p. 22). Students are participants in relation to assessment, what is being done to them are shared.

In promoting a community of shared understanding of assessment practice there are a number of things that tutors can do:

- (1) Make criteria explicit to students. Make sure, from the outset that they are familiar with them and the particular points in their learning where these criteria are likely to be applied.
- (2) At a significant stage in the learning cycle, take time to go through these criteria with the students, unpacking both your own and their understanding of what is meant (you mean/they understand) by the different statements included in the grade descriptions. If the system is hierarchical, then what is meant by each of the statements within these hierarchical descriptors in relation to evidence of meeting that standard.
- (3) Work with past exemplars and get students to assess this exemplar work in relation to their own interpretations.
- (4) Encourage students to articulate how they interpret the standard and get them moderating their own decisions, coming to a consensus about the standard exemplified in the exemplar material.

- (5) Encourage students to assess their own and other's work. The integrating self-assessment and peer-assessment processes into active learning cycles can only benefit students' own understanding of how they will be assessed by their tutors and examiners as they progress through their course.
- (6) Timely, relevant feedback is essential to increasing students' understanding of how the criteria are applied and how they can move forward. For example, integrating into feedback descriptions ways in which students might move from one level to the next higher level, making explicit for them what they need to do to get to the next stage.

In pursuing the goals of effective assessment for learning, it is fundamental for teachers and students to grow in a community of practice where nothing in the assessment process is hidden and all hurdles are understood clearly and explicitly. It is only then that assessment will be fully understood as the most important tool for effective learning.

### **Notes on Contributors**

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