

A report on the development of practice in assessment during a PGCE year

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ABSTRACT

This report describes the current position of my professional development in the area of monitoring and assessment. It includes a discussion of some of the theoretical debates in the field of assessment and describes the place of Citizenship Education within this area of teaching and learning. The reflection and evaluations seek to link theory with practice and these appraisals are also an attempt to learn from my early experiences in my first school placement and to improve my practice in my second placement. The report also contains a small sample of work by the students I have taught together with some of the associated resources that I have developed for specific activities.

Assembling this report has been a valuable experience. I have had the opportunity to reassess some of the work I have done over the last eight months, some of which I had all but forgotten as the course moved quickly on. This in itself was a reminder for me to continue to build into my practice time to re-examine lessons and activities that can so easily be filed away under 'done that, move on'. The levels of monitoring and assessment in each placement were very different; however, even where there was little formal assessment (Placement 1), the experience of Placement 2 helped me to contextualise this as I could begin to see how I would do things differently, and indeed, even initiate forms of assessment, if I could have my time again.

If I had ranked at the start of the course what I considered to be the priority areas for teaching and learning, assessment would not have made it into the top three. As I head into the final lap of my PGCE I find myself placing assessment very high on the priority list. As I have discovered, assessment in its many forms is a key part of raising self esteem and for motivating students, for taking students to the next level and for celebrating their success. It provides the teacher with critical information that can be looped back into the teaching and learning cycle. I have great deal more to learn in this area but my commitment to the process will ensure that assessment and monitoring will form one of the main components of my NQT year.

ASSESSMENT & MONITORING REPORT

1. Context of assessment

Assessment is at the heart of traditional schooling. Many argue that this is a good thing and there are important reasons why we test and evaluate. Some of these reasons include:

- For accountability; for students, teachers, parents and institutions.
- For targets; so that we can know if we have reached our expectations.
- For analysing and improving teaching and learning.

- For student motivation.

Targets, attaining them, and the ‘political’ importance for schools to improve grades, increases pressure on teachers and institutions to gravitate towards even more assessment. All this impacts on the day-to-day school life of young people, and there is concern that we are now testing our children too much and that detrimental effects on well-being are being detected. For citizenship however, the reverse appears to be the case. My experience as a beginning teacher (BT) tells me that, compared with other curricular subjects, very little regular and standardised assessment take place. Ofsted also notes:

“Assessment remains one of the weakest areas of citizenship teaching.” (Ofsted, 2005, p.1.)

How we test and the extent to which we test remains an on-going discussion in all curricular subjects, including citizenship. But for citizenship, the additional philosophical question of whether we should assess at all remains a live issue. Some argue that citizenship is quite unlike other subjects, and that in addition to knowledge and understanding, its focus on skills and values, on discussion and debate, means that it will function very differently from traditional teaching and learning.

“Citizenship is a different kind of subject area and needs different kind of thinking about how it is assessed – official guidance (rightly) underlines the idea that it should be creative, varied and emphasise pupil involvement.” (Brett P, 2004, p.7.)

Brett emphasises that citizenship can only really be learnt by ‘doing it’ and it is clear that some skills, and values, are very difficult to monitor and assess. Others go further by arguing that assessment itself is contrary to the ethos of the subject i.e. is it right that while we are encouraging the development of critical and independent thinking, of active and engaged citizens, that we should at the same time be grading one student against another? On the other hand, in the absence of any assessment, where will the accountability come from and how can we know whether our students are developing and our teaching improving?

2. Assessment of Learning and Assessment for Learning

Most students would think of assessment simply as testing, a way of finding out what they know at a particular moment in time. For the teacher, this usually involves the production of data based on prior learning or ‘the cumulative learning experience’ of the student. The kinds of traditional questions that might initiate assessment are:

- Have students reached a learning objective in the syllabus?
- Are students able to do a particular thing required by the syllabus?

This approach to evaluation is known as *summative assessment* i.e. summarising some element of learning to date. Summative assessment can also be referred to as ‘assessment of learning’. Because of the established nature of this type of assessment, most students would expect to receive ‘a grade’ for both their course work and during particular points in the learning process. Many students would also be keen to compare their own grades with the efforts of their classmates. In addition, it is usually the teacher who plans, monitors and drives the learning process i.e. the teacher wants to teach something, the teacher teaches it, the teacher assesses the extent to which the students have learnt it, and then the teacher moves on to teach something else. In other words, summative assessment is often, but not always, the consequence of this type of traditional ‘cycle’ of teaching and learning and is often more closely associated with accountability - for parents, for league tables and for evidence to allow students to move to the next qualification level. In contrast, *formative assessment*, or Assessment for Learning (AfL) has a different function or purpose: In addition to simply providing information on what the student has achieved, AfL focuses on adapting and modifying teaching and learning in order correspond with the level and learning style of the student. It is this relationship between what the learner does *during* the learning process and what the teacher observes, and as important, what *the student* observes, that sets apart summative and formative assessment. It is interesting though, as Lee Jerome points out, that;

“On the one hand there is more summative testing than ever before, but on the other, [Black and Wiliams’ work on] formative assessment has become profoundly influential with teachers, the DfES and QCA.” (Jerome L, 2004, p.3.)

It is widely agreed that both summative and formative assessment have value, even though formative assessment is currently driving educational thinking and practice. It seems to me therefore, that it remains the responsibility of the class teacher to use formative and summative assessment in combined, appropriate and meaningful ways.

One of the principal drivers for the current interest in and commitment to AfL has been the work by Black and Wiliam, particularly in respect of their paper ‘Inside the Black Box’ (1998). The key phrase in the paper appears in the first paragraph when they are discussing planning, target setting, performance etc;

“But the sum of all of these doesn't add up to an effective policy because something is missing” (p.1.)

As discussed earlier, AfL is interested in what the learner does *during* the learning process. For Black and Wiliam, it is impossible to understand this process if we are concerned only with outputs, with the results from summative testing and not with what may be happening inside ‘the black box’. How can we know, ask the authors, whether or not our inputs are counter-productive? How can we therefore know if our teaching is effective, particularly from one student to another? One of the keys to getting inside the box is *student self assessment*; indeed, the connection between this type of assessment and AfL is for Black and Wiliam no accident – ‘it is’ they say ‘inevitable’. Many teachers may avoid this approach because they believe that students will not be trustworthy in their judgements, but it has been found that this in general is not the case. In my own discussions with students

about their own work, and when they have self-assessed, I have found a great deal of candour and (as Black and Wiliam also note) that many students undersell themselves and are 'too hard' in their assessments. I think what is important to appreciate is that self assessment is a learned skill and that, again as Black and Wiliam point out, 'pupils should be trained' to do this. In other words, self assessment should be integrated into lesson planning and schemes of work in the same way that other pedagogical approaches are. Black and Wiliam also make the important point that grading can in fact work against the growth and development of individual students. They point out that receiving poor grades can impact negatively on self esteem, particularly for those students who are not naturally academic or who do not fall into the category of the 'high achiever'. 'Retiring hurt' is a real consequence for many students who are consistently marked low. It seems obvious to me therefore that formative assessment can be a powerful tool to engage, or re-engage the low achieving student.

The 10 Principles of Assessment for Learning developed by the Assessment Reform Group (2002) can be found in the Appendix. Some of the key aspects of this approach can be summarised as follows:

- The importance of regular self assessment.
- Developing a 'learning dialogue' between student and teacher.
- Providing targets – giving guidance for improvement.
- Modifying teaching based on feedback from assessments.
- Building motivation by downgrading 'competitive marks' and emphasising achievement and 'next steps'.

3. Statutory requirements

The statutory requirements for recording and assessing students of citizenship in secondary schools are less prescriptive and detailed than for most other curriculum subjects. There is a requirement to keep detailed records on the progress and achievements of individual students, which includes annual reports to parents. In respect of formal assessments, schools are required only to assess attainment at the end of KS3, and assessment will necessarily take place at the end of the GCSE short course if schools choose to run this. However, since citizenship is a foundation subject, individual schools are expected to develop forms of assessment that are at least comparable with other curriculum subjects. (There is clearly a distinction here between a statutory requirement and *an expectation* as there was a vast difference in the levels of assessment between my first and second placements.) The end of KS3 assessment is based on an attainment target which is a descriptor of the level of knowledge, understanding and skills students are required to achieve by the start of year 10, equivalent to levels 5 & 6 in other subjects. The descriptor is based on a Programme of Study (PoS) which is currently in place for both KS3 and KS4. Beyond this, guidance is available from QCA which recommends using a grading system which describes student attainment in terms of 'working towards' 'working at' and 'working beyond'. This is an example of 'criteria referencing' where students are assessed against an objective standard (as distinct from ipsative assessment - against a student's own performance, or norm referencing - against their peers). Overall, there are on-going

concerns about the level and rigour of assessment in citizenship education. As I noted earlier, a recent Ofsted report criticised citizenship assessment in secondary schools. One particular concern was the lack of written work; and when students were asked to produce work the standard was often 'well below their achievement in other subjects'. In my first written assignment for my PGCE course, I discussed some of the issues slowing the progress of citizenship in schools and suggested that the lack of specialists was a key factor. It seems to me therefore that since citizenship is generally taught by non specialists, many of whom lack either the commitment or the training to deliver an effective citizenship programme, then we should not be surprised that assessment is poorer in this subject than in other subject areas. Against this background, there is clearly an opportunity for new citizenship specialists like myself to make a major contribution to raising the standard of citizenship assessment, including shaping the nature of the assessment itself.

4. Reflections on evidence of work

My placement schools provided me with two very different experiences. At Placement 1, there was no short-course GCSE on offer nor was homework issued on a regular basis. This should surprise no one in a school where the citizenship curriculum is delivered by seventeen teachers whose specialisms lie elsewhere. So at Placement 1, I tended to focus on other aspects of teaching e.g. lesson planning, classroom management, the systems and protocols of the school etc. I did have the opportunity however to design a unit of work for a year 8 class which concluded with an end of unit assessment. I used both summative (marks out of 24) and formative assessment. This was my first attempt at providing formative comments and it is interesting now, at this later stage and after more reading on AfL, to now look back at this work. I think that some of my comments/observations were helpful and positive e.g. underlining well-chosen words and writing next to these words 'good word!' However, I can now see that in some cases my comments were not 'future directed' i.e. providing next steps or setting a target. For example one comment I gave was 'This does not explain why it is not a good law. You have only given your opinion'. While I have attempted to demonstrate the student's 'mistake' and also highlighted a key word (by underlining that word), I fail to offer an example of how to improve the student's performance. It was also an error on my part to use the phrase 'you have only given your opinion' as this might have suggested to the student that giving an opinion was not what the question asked for, which is not the case. I am pleased however that some of my later marking work in Placement 2 begins to reflect the setting of targets and includes comments that hopefully also encourage and promote confidence. A second piece of assessment at Placement 1 was on the topic of anti-racism where I developed a peer mark scheme. I remember putting in a great deal of work on the design and presentation of this assessment, and thinking very carefully about the language I would choose for the assessment paper itself (and for the differentiated paper). The students produced some excellent and thoughtful work and in this sense I consider this one of my more successful assessment activities. But I realise too that not enough thought went into the peer marking aspect; and while it was clear that the students enjoyed the exercise I wonder to what extent they benefited from the peer-marking task. I discuss this further in the assessment evaluation included at the end of this report. In my second placement I developed a unit of work that included two assessments. Reflecting on Placement 1 where the assessments were pretty

much an afterthought, I now 'built-in' these two assessments during the design of the unit. I could immediately see after doing this that the unit had more of a rationale and a shape than the unit of work I had designed at Placement 1. Integrating assessments in the planning stage also gives lesson plans greater direction and I found myself more confident during the lessons themselves, and particularly towards the end of each lesson when recalling lesson objectives and setting up the following lesson. Two of the main citizenship assessments I developed at Placement 2 were; peer and self assessments based on PowerPoint Presentations, and an end of unit assessment based on the work done over the course of eight lessons. The peer assessment activity went very well and I am certain that this was because it had been integrated into the unit that had allowed me to flag up the assessment at an earlier point in the unit and to spend time with students explaining how it worked and why we were doing it. This was also the case for the end of unit assessment, which I had discussed with the students three weeks in advance. The first of these assessments is evidenced in this report.

Concluding comments

Assessment and monitoring remains a key area for my professional development. My confidence is certainly higher than it was at the end of Placement 1 and I am now more critical in my thinking when considering assessments and marking work. What I am now very clear about is the central role assessment plays in motivating students and helping them to move to the next stage in their learning. Black and Williams' work has inspired me to read further on the subject and to spend more time thinking through the important issues they raise. This will be a priority for me in my NQT year.

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The appendices to this article are at: