



Personalising learning – 2

Student voice and assessment for learning

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A joint publication with The Secondary Heads Association

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This publication

Audience

Teachers and leaders at all levels in education.

Aim

To show how student voice and assessment for learning put the student at the centre of change, and enable the student to be active in learning.

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Introduction

How to use this pamphlet

The pamphlet reports on the discussions and presentations at the Specialist Schools Trust and Secondary Heads Association conferences in London (1 and 12 October 2004) and, in the case of student voice, on the preceding iNet world-wide, online conference. It is the second pamphlet in the series. The first, *Personalising learning: next steps in working laterally*, set the general context for the series, including the nine gateways and the sequence of conferences over the next five terms, as follows:

- student voice *and* assessment for learning (autumn 2004)
- learning to learn *and* the new technologies (spring 2005)
- curriculum *and* advice and guidance (summer 2005)
- workforce development *and* mentoring and coaching (autumn 2005)
- school organisation and design *and* leadership (spring 2006).

All secondary schools are already doing something, however small, in every gateway. At the same time, no one school is a leader in using all the gateways as routes to personalising learning. For each gateway a number of schools are pioneering innovation, and among whom are those who made conference presentations. The wealth of their practical experience with the gateways cannot be captured in a short pamphlet. Details of work in schools on these two gateways and case studies of their development may be found on the Trust website www.schoolsnetwork.org.uk. Further material and contacts for the schools making presentations are provided at the end of the pamphlet.

The discussion of each gateway explored in this pamphlet is in two parts. First, there is an introductory overview of the area, drawing on practical work and theoretical ideas. A select bibliography of outstanding, practitioner-friendly books is provided at the end of the pamphlet.

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In the second part, several stepping-stones are suggested as ways in which the gateway might be entered by a school. Personalising learning is a journey for both teachers and students: the learning involved cannot be rushed. The pace will vary from time to time as the journey develops its natural rhythms. Each stepping stone is really a collection of smaller stepping stones that vary in scale and scope. Progress is made as those involved gain the confidence to move forward to more ambitious activities.

The general advice for both student voice and assessment for learning is *think big – start small*. In other words, have the vision of where you might be when all the stepping stones are fully in place, embedded in the culture and routine life of the school. But start with a small group of willing volunteers, on a limited agenda of innovation. These become the foundations on which to build more challenging developments and draw other colleagues into the venture. Several of the reported case studies show how schools progressively developed student voice and assessment for learning over several years. These are not quick fix solutions.

It may be helpful to start work simultaneously, with different teams, on both student voice and assessment for learning. Several of our case studies reveal how they were developed in parallel. The teams soon discover the overlap and see how each supports and strengthens the other. Such an approach demonstrates how distributed innovation requires distributed leadership.

Questions

Who in your school is ready to think big about student voice or assessment for learning?

Which group among your staff is ready to undertake the work involved in the chosen gateway(s)?

What background preparation is needed? How much help comes from the resources, suggestions and potential contacts provided in this pamphlet?

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Personalising learning can be approached through any of the nine gateways. Student voice and assessment for learning are the first two gateways, examined in the SST/SHA conferences starting in October 2004, and reported in this series of pamphlets. In a sense they are natural places from which to begin personalisation, since both put the student at the centre of change, posing at least as many challenges to teachers as to the students. Both are also very closely bound up with enhancing the capacity of the student to focus on, and be active in, learning.

The first pamphlet, *Personalising learning: next steps in working laterally*, suggested that the nine gateways may be regarded as routes from the educational ‘imaginary’ of the 19th century to that of the 21st century. Of the 10 differences between these educational imaginaries, three are of particular relevance to student voice and assessment for learning:

C19 educational imaginary

- school is designed and organised on the basis of the factory model
- roles are sharply defined and segregated: teachers are clearly teachers (in their academic gowns) and students are dressed as, and behave like, students
- education is producer-led: teachers know best and have power to decide

C21 educational imaginary

- school is designed and organised to provide personalised education for all students

- roles are blurred and overlapping: teachers learn as well as teach, students mentor other students as well as learn for themselves, and new professional roles emerge to complement that of the teacher
- education is user-led (though at what point students rather than their parents are the users is an open question)

Student voice and assessment for learning have considerable impact on blurring the distinctness of teacher and student roles. The student sometimes takes on a teaching role, both of other students and of the teacher; this is necessary if teachers are to learn about student needs, learning preferences and strengths/weaknesses. Both gateways reflect the customisation aspect of personalisation, by which the education providers (teachers and other staff) seek to respond directly to student needs and preferences in the way teaching and learning are organised. Education, and its improvement, become more user-driven. Indeed, Lipson Community College in Plymouth explicitly treats students, parents, employers and the community as customers whose needs are to be served, and they have modified the work of W E Deming, who was so influential in Japanese industry, and models of total quality management, in pursuit of total quality learning. As they express it, ‘the college only exists for you, be you a student or a parent.’

Commonalities to student voice and assessment for learning

There are six main themes that are shared by these two gateways.

Engagement – both increase the student’s engagement in learning, in the activities of the classroom and the life of the school

Responsibility – both increase the student’s responsibility for self, for learning and behaviour, in part by giving the student more control over them

Meta-cognitive skills – both increase the student’s control over thinking and learning

Relationships with staff – both give these relationships greater maturity, since they become more open, more honest, and more collaborative: the relationships are characterised by mutual respect, grounded in self-esteem

Social skills – in both, the student’s capacity to communicate a point of view, to construct a coherent argument, to make a presentation and to assume a leadership role are all enhanced by new interpersonal skills; and of particular importance is the capacity and confidence to talk about work and learning

Participation – in both, the student’s active participation in classroom and school is enhanced because he/she is actively involved in the design of learning, teaching, assessment and the life of the school through processes of co-construction

These six themes can be seen as outcomes of personalisation when approached through the gateways of student voice and assessment for learning. All six help teachers and students to develop a shared, richer vocabulary for talking about learning. This is probably a critical ingredient in personalising learning.

In the exploration of student voice and assessment for learning you will also find links to other gateways, and in particular to learning how to learn, mentoring and coaching, and advice and guidance.

Questions

Look through the list of commonalities. Identify those in your school that are already strengths on which to build. Then identify those that are relatively weak and can be improved through your chosen gateway(s).

If your school has done work on neither assessment for learning nor student voice, is it possible for one group of staff to start work on one gateway and a second group to start on the other, with both groups actively working to the commonalities as described above?

If a school has worked on one of the two but not both, is it possible to introduce the second gateway by using the commonalities as a bridge into a development that intentionally strengthens the first gateway while building a new and complementary one?

Chapter 2 Student voice: the gateway

Like the other gateways, student voice can be defined in many ways. In its widest sense, it would include every way in which students are allowed or encouraged to voice their views or preferences. In this sense, all teachers from time to time encourage and are involved in student voice. It may be defined to include more novel ways in which students work with one another, such as buddy systems or peer tutoring (which in this series will be dealt with in the pamphlet on mentoring and coaching). But in this pamphlet, student voice is mainly about *how students come to play a more active role in their education and schooling as a direct result of teachers becoming more attentive, in sustained or routine ways, to what students say about their experience of learning and of school life.*

Student voice is, of all the gateways, the outstanding example of why the gateways are not a set of independent projects, add-ons or initiatives that become adjuncts to the school as it now is. Student voice is a gateway to change. Student voice flourishes in a particular kind of school culture. In turn, it helps to replenish such a culture – one that reflects and sustains the school as a community of learners.

The idea of community most neatly captures what student voice is about. It is not simply about introducing new structures, such as student councils, or about providing other occasional opportunities for students to speak their mind or have their say. It is about forming more open and trustful relationships between staff and students. This works when the same applies to relationships between students, between staff and students, among the staff, and between school leaders and their professional colleagues.

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Such relationships presuppose a willingness to listen, and to develop the skill of doing so attentively. This recognises that many meanings and intentions are implicit and subtle rather than obvious and explicit, and non-defensively accepts that open expression can sometimes be tinged with anger or resentment.

The fear that students will say things that are unwelcome or challenging, and maybe disrespectful and offensive, makes student voice more difficult for teachers than for students to embark on. There are natural suspicions among both students and teachers.

- For students, the fear is that staff do not really want to listen, but will only hear what they want to hear, and that ‘consultation’ is yet more empty rhetoric or merely tokenistic if students do not come up with the ‘right’ message.
- For staff, the nervousness is that the experience will be an unpleasant one that threatens their authority and control

Both parties are in some respects vulnerable and need help with overcoming these fears and gaining confidence that student voice can have positive benefits for all. Some early benefits, however small, ensure progress and counteract cynicism. This means that teachers need to provide students with tangible evidence, not just promises, that their voice is having a real effect and making a difference. This is particularly important where student voice has offered suggestions about different ways of teaching or organising lessons. Colleagues also need to see evidence of the impact of student voice on student attitude and conduct if they are to be persuaded of its value. In short, everybody needs to see that student voice creates a partnership between staff and student that results in teaching and learning being co-constructed.

Part of the key is trust. Teachers have always expected students to trust them and are disappointed when they do not. But the fact is that teachers do not always trust students, especially the disaffected and disengaged; and even when they do, they may behave in ways that signal to students that they are in a low trust environment. Trust breeds trust, and leads to the climate

out of which mutual respect arises. It takes time for students to feel confident that they can be constructively critical of lessons and aspects of schooling without causing offence and incurring punitive reprisals. They often need considerable help, not in what to say, but how to say it so that it really can be heard. It takes time for sceptical or cautious teachers to become convinced that the potential benefits make it worth the risks involved. Confidence on both sides builds up, slowly, on relatively safe terrain. There thus arises the danger of student voice becoming restricted to a minority of teachers who feel comfortable with student voice activities and a minority of articulate, middle-class students who feel equally at home. But this does not generate the wider change in culture and climate on which the development of a learning community of mutual respect among all members depends.

As the development of student voice extends from safe topics or groups, more risks have to be taken and more problems will arise that need to be talked through to find solutions or alternative ways of working. Some experiments will have to be abandoned, but if the decision to abandon is shared by all the parties this can be done without regret and with positive lessons learned.

Student voice is a shorthand term that masks diverse elements; it is inherently heterogeneous. There are many subgroups of students, each of which takes a particular stance on an issue, making it very difficult to generalise about what the students think or want or advise. This lack of consensus can be used by staff as a means of discounting student voice altogether – ‘we have to decide because they can’t agree’. Alternatively, staff can claim a quite false consensus or crude majoritarianism on matters such as school policies or rules, general facilities or the environment of the school, which inevitably affect everyone. But it can also be the basis for sensitive exploration of how decisions can be reached without total agreement, involving various forms of compromise or an acceptance that sometimes one’s own view cannot prevail.

Dissent on issues that are of evident importance for students is natural and should always be expected and accepted; it does

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not have to be ignored or suppressed. As John MacBeath has suggested, there are in a school so many voices (some of which may not be verbal) that there are harmonies and discords. Strident shrieks, soft whispers, and silences, both natural and enforced. Replacing cacophony with the right acoustic balance is the task of leadership. Part of student voice is getting students to listen to one another and to respect different views. For this reason, in some schools student voice provides the basis for learning about, and in, democracy and citizenship.

Of particular importance in personalising learning is the voice of the individual student, by which every individual is able, with confidence, to express himself/herself to others, and particularly to staff. Many of the developments and activities taking place under the general umbrella of student voice are directed at the whole student body or subsections of it, such as school councils, rather than at the unique individual. It is important to recognise, however, that these collective expressions of student voice do bear on the potential of individual student voice for personalising learning, for two reasons.

- Even if the individual has no direct involvement in such activities, their existence shapes the general culture and climate so that students feel they are valued and trusted, and may express themselves in open ways
- Such activities affect teachers by making them generally more responsive to student voice and its potential value, both in what it says and in how it improves relationships

What is it that the individuals express? Points of view, opinions, ideas, suggestions, worries and concerns are obvious examples, some of which will relate directly to learning and to teaching. On matters of learning, and preferences or needs over, say, curriculum content or learning style, one soon encounters the distinction between student wants and student needs. Traditionally the teacher is the arbiter of these, on the assumption that students constantly confuse wants (short-term) with true needs (longer-term). Within student voice, there is a constant dialogue around this tension, to help the student to

recognise the difference between the two and to make decisions that give needs priority over wants, through a process of self-diagnosis and mature decision-making.

Personalising learning will often demand a *private conversation* between teacher and student. Too often teachers experience such conversations as largely one-sided, the student being taciturn, unforthcoming, defensive, even sullen, so that what was intended as an exchange or dialogue becomes something of a lecture. The kind of conversation that is sought, with non-defensive openness on both sides, is much more likely to arise when the student finds this teacher trustworthy and approachable. The student must also be able to set the conversation within the broader context of a school culture where students are valued and their voice is known to be valued and listened to.

On some issues, small group conversations can be powerful sources of student voice. The lone interview with a teacher can be intimidating to some students. The small circle protects and supports the reticent individual, who can nod agreement to what he or she would not have dared say, or who might build on a line that another student has started to explore. A group conversation does not look targeted at the individual, though all who participate may be affected by decisions or outcomes.

The most sensitive area tends to be student voice on teaching – how the teacher teaches and organises the lesson or treats the individual student. Teachers spend much time and effort trying to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of their teaching – but with experience tend to settle on particular ways of working as part of their teaching style and repertoire. Of course they keep an eye on student response and try to react flexibly when things do not seem to go well or as expected. Inviting students to give more direct and open feedback, in the form of their evaluations or suggestions, requires courage, for some of the messages may not be welcome. The object, however, is to create a partnership between the teacher and the class, or the teacher and the student, so that teaching-and-learning are co-constructed to make the experience more rewarding and more effective for both. It is here where student voice and assessment for learning most closely overlap.

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When student voice works, there are gains all round. By convention students are expected to interrogate evidence and question assumptions in their critical evaluations of curricular work. But they are not expected to adopt a similar approach to the way the school is organised, or the way lessons and teaching are conducted. There is a new and empowering consistency when students are expected to be constructively critical of the whole of their school experience, not just the selected safe bits. This changes the general culture of the school, establishing that this is the natural way in which students are treated here. Thus students become ready to participate actively and responsibly in matters of high importance and consequence, such as a school self-evaluation.

Teachers are frequently surprised and delighted, even awed, at what emerges from student voice and at how experience of voice increases students' commitment to learning and to the school. With hindsight, teachers often realise that when students are consulted about, and feel they have made an active contribution to, any proposed changes, they too have ownership of new practices and so work to make them a success. On this view, school improvement is not something that is decided by staff and then done to the student body, but an action programme, involving joint working parties, which the students help to shape and then to implement.

Through such serious dialogue between staff and students, new linguistic registers emerge. Relationships can be handled honestly but diplomatically; all sides have new negotiation skills. Students feel they are genuinely valued and trusted, and treated as real persons, often as adults. Student voice is thus a means to improving the partnership between teacher and taught in ways that enhance learning.

As teachers listen to students with open and trustful attention, students reveal more of themselves. This includes the exposure of weaknesses and anxieties, which the teacher needs to understand, but which might otherwise remain closely guarded, and so submerged. It also includes the revelation of unsuspected talents and interests, which might challenge and so broaden the teacher's current conception of the student and

his or her abilities. At the same time, great care is needed by the teacher to avoid exploiting this situation, for to do so can cause a rupture in the newly won but highly fragile trust. For both staff and students such relationships can be a powerful education in emotional intelligence.

When student voice is most fully developed, teachers invite students to observe their lessons and provide feedback and suggestions on how they might be improved. Students are invited to interview applicants for staff appointments, and to contribute to their induction after appointment. Students are then true partners in learning.

Questions

In your school what is being done already in terms of student voice, however small it may seem? Can further developments be built on this?

To what extent is your school's culture consonant with the further development of student voice? Is there a commitment in your school to the notion of school as a community of learners? What are the implications of your answer to these questions?

How will your leadership team create a climate in which student voice can prosper?

What fears about student voice do you think exist among staff and students? How might you discover these fears and begin to allay them?

What sorts of small group conversations are appropriate in your circumstances?

Is there a danger that in developing collective student voice activities you neglect the importance of the individual student's voice in personalising learning?

When some benefits begin to show, how do you present these to others who are sceptical or cynical about student voice activities?

Chapter 3 Student voice: stepping stones

1. School councils and school governance

School councils are common in secondary schools. Much more rare are effective school councils that provide collective student voice to create a culture of trust and mutual respect. This is what underpins a learning community, in which learning and teaching are a constant focus for reflection and improvement. Of course, such councils do not have personalising learning as their main aim: it would never be more than one aim or by-product of a council. Unquestionably a successful school council reflects and sustains a climate in which student voice in many varieties will prosper. The issues under discussion need to be relevant and varied, and not limited to short-term or relatively trivial matters. Unless explicit and regular links between the whole student body and the council's agenda and achievements are forged, members of such councils will be a small minority of students, and their actions will seem irrelevant to most students. Staff, and particularly the head teacher, must be seen to support the council and its work.

Archbishop Michael Ramsay Technology College (Southwark) has: a council of some 150 students, meeting twice a term; year councils of 12 students, meeting twice a term; and a Cabinet of 24 student leaders that meets for a working lunch once a week. In addition there are specialised roles as ambassadors and senior monitors as part of the leadership development for students. These are not, as can easily happen, independent or add-on structures that are insulated from the normal life and work of the school. They are carefully woven into the fabric of this school's distinctive culture. As principal Wendy Parmley says: 'Student voice has transformed our learning culture.'

Because pupils can talk about and evaluate their work, their levels of achievement have shot up.’

At Lipson Community College (Plymouth) the work on student voice arose out of a commitment to creating a community of learners, which necessitated their becoming a community of listeners. It bred a wider concern with developing student leadership around the college council and its feeder councils of houses (in Lipson called guilds). So for several years, within the overall concept of student voice, the college has trained lead learners, students who support the learning of others. Students are trained as mediators to give them skills in conflict resolution, which has a positive impact on behaviour. The weekly circle time is highly developed at Lipson to ensure that every student has a regular opportunity to discuss issues affecting them or of concern to them. There are student interview panels for new staff appointments.

At Gable Hall (Essex) students become associate governors as the head, John King, believes that students have a role to play in shaping the strategic direction of the school. They are trained for this role by a programme that covers: meeting structure, code of behaviour, negotiation skills, presenting a persuasive argument, collective responsibility and confidentiality. The effect of student involvement in school governance has benefits for governors, for students and for the conduct of the meeting, which becomes more pleasant and intelligible. Students become actively involved in improving the school and so feel valued. The wider effect is that all students believe they are taken more seriously by a governing body whose profile has risen sharply, but also by teachers who know that student views count. The governors feel their decision-making has improved and has the backing of the student body.

John King believes that student voice should be not only about *how* students are taught, but also about *what* they are taught. Many of the students, like those elsewhere in this country, do not see the curriculum as relevant to them. Now they are to be involved in reviewing the key stage three curriculum, as active participants in the design and implementation of change, and ultimately of its evaluation.

In all these case studies, student voice is a means of developing leadership among students. It makes the whole student body feel that the school is theirs, not the staff's, and that they play a vital role in maintaining and developing the school.

2. Students as researchers

The idea of students as researchers, say Michael Fielding and Sarah Bragg, 'promotes partnerships in which students work alongside teachers to mobilise their knowledge of school and become "change agents" of its culture and norms. It seeks to develop among students and teachers a shared sense of responsibility for the quality and conditions of teaching and learning, both within particular classrooms and more generally within the school as a learning community.'

It makes three assumptions: that students and teachers may have different views on what is significant or important in learning, or might mean different things by them; that such differences can be a source of creative improvement rather than destructive conflict; and that creating conditions for dialogue is a way of improving the school culture.

Students agree with their teachers a topic that matters to them – a question, a problem, an idea - for further investigation. If there is a focus on learning, rather than school policy or environment, it might be a relatively safe topic, such as:

- student learning styles
- gender differences in learning
- what is needed to make the school council work better

or one that might at first sight seem more threatening to staff, such as:

- what helps or hinders learning
- what makes a good lesson
- what qualities are needed in a year tutor

Depending on their age and experience, students will need help in:

- framing the question or issue so that it is researchable
- estimating the scale and time frame for the investigation
- designing instruments (interviews, questionnaires) to collect evidence
- interpreting the evidence and drawing warranted conclusions
- presenting the evidence with relevant recommendations.

The gains for students are that they:

- believe they are respected, listened to and taken seriously
- learn that their views have an impact and influence change
- develop greater control over their own learning and improve their meta-cognitive skills
- create a climate in which it is normal and natural to talk about teaching and learning
- increase their skills of research and investigation, which can be transferred to subject study
- improve their capacity to present arguments and engage in mature dialogue with staff
- enhance their skills at working in teams
- develop ownership of, and commitment to, any emergent, acceptable recommendations and changes
- see the staff as partners in learning
- contribute to making the school a learning community.

All of these yield benefits for teachers too.

At Hastingsbury Upper School and Community College (Bedfordshire), students have been given a rich experience in research. The first of the seven principles that guide student voice states: students decide the topics and their direction. As assistant head Gill Mullis reports: 'Four years ago we started school councils, and when we asked students what they wanted

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on the agenda, it was very much the social area, and when we said “What about talking about what goes on in lessons?” they said, “No, we’re not interested in that.” A year and a half later, a group of students said to me, “We want a teaching and learning committee and we’d like to identify what we want to look into”.’ Gill insists there is still some way to go. ‘I’d like to get to the stage where it’s all a natural part of what we do, that the dialogue [between teachers and students] occurs every day, and every student feels able to comment on and feed back on the teaching and learning.’

Progress made in this aspect of student voice at Hastingbury reflects the fact that there are many related activities. For example, some students are trained by Relate to offer lunchtime counselling; other students are trained as peer mediators and peer mentors. Associated roles for students are tour guides and interviewers. Students are involved in recruiting new members of staff and in joint working parties with staff.

The Bolton Network Learning Community’s work on student voice had its origins in Teaching and Learning Research Programme’s project on consulting students (see references). Its current work is unusual in that the student voice activities are networked. At their first conference in 2003, 400 pupils from 16 schools and one independent school met on a Saturday at the Reebok stadium, the home of Bolton Wanderers, where they networked together and ran workshops on a variety of themes, such as anti-bullying, peer pressure and school councils. They then decided to call themselves BLAST – Bolton listens as students talk. A second conference was a consultative exercise on health and well-being. This led to a review of counselling facilities; as a result a handbook was produced for all the participating schools. Another development was the pupil learning walk, by which a group of students visits other schools to see what might be learned from them and then implemented in their home school. In one school an internal student voice day led to the creation of five steering groups to take forward ideas for change.

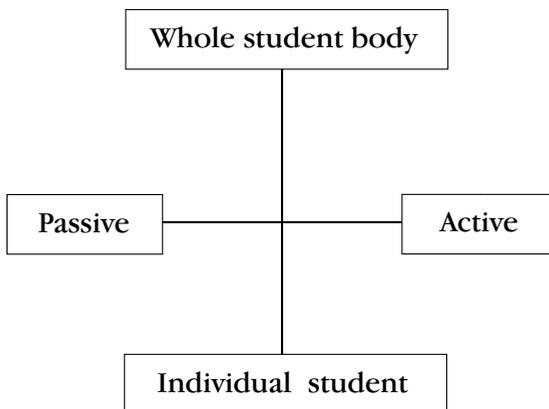
3. A map for student voice

There have been several attempts at constructing typologies of student voice. Michael Fielding believes student voice moves both teachers and students beyond the dominant orientation to instrumental learning towards a richer conception of wider human flourishing. He suggests a progressive scale of activities for students-as-researchers as both students and teachers gain more confidence and recognise the benefits. These are:

- students as sources of useful data for staff, but playing no active role
- students as active respondents, discussing the data openly with staff
- students as co-researchers with teachers on agreed issues
- students as independent researchers: research is initiated, conducted and reported by students.

Offered here is a map or grid of student voice activities that a school might build up over time, moving from the relatively safe to the more adventurous as experience accrues and confidence grows.

Figure 1



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A grid would be unique to a school, but can be constructed in a two-dimensional space. One axis is whether the activity is for the individual student or for the school as an institution; the other axis is whether the student(s) is relatively passive or highly active.

Where might, as examples, the following student voice activities at their best be located on the grid?

- a survey of year 8 students explores what they think helps and hinders learning
- a focus group of students discusses learning styles
- some students are invited to observe lessons and offer feedback to teachers
- the student council discusses the state of student toilets
- a student has a one-to-one discussion about learning with a teacher
- a group of student researchers investigates what makes a good lesson and reports back to staff and the student council
- students are invited to join the committee to appoint new learning support assistants
- every student is provided with an individual learning plan
- one student from every year becomes an associate governor
- students visit another school to investigate good practice and report back to students and staff with recommendations
- students design and organise a parents' evening

Questions

Which stepping stones are most appropriate to your school in developing the student voice gateway?

Which topics or areas will you, your colleagues and your students select for student voice activities? Why are these being chosen? Are staff and students agreed on them?

Are there resources in this pamphlet on which you might draw to help you move forward?

How will you know when you are able to introduce the more radical aspects of student voice, such as involving students in staff appointments?

Students, like teachers, are more influenced by their peers than by outsiders. Teachers are also influenced when students testify that new practices really do work. So to what extent could and should students play a much bigger role in transferring practices of student voice (i) within your school and (ii) to both students and teachers in schools other than your own?

Chapter 4 Assessment for learning: the gateway

What exactly is assessment for learning? There are many approaches. For the Assessment Reform Group, assessment for learning ‘is a process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go, and how best to get there.’

This may be elaborated as: assessment for learning is the process of identifying what the learner has or has not achieved in order to plan the next steps in teaching or learning. Feedback is provided to the learner on his/her learning and performance in such a way that either the teacher adjusts the teaching in order to help the student learn more effectively, or the learner changes his/her approach to the learning task, or both of these.

Assessment for learning is about feedback, but not any kind of feedback. Much of the feedback that teachers give to students, whether positive (‘That’s right: well done’) or negative (‘No, that’s not quite right: you can do better than this.’) does not meet the definition given above, for such feedback changes neither the way the teacher teaches nor the way the student learns. As Mary James points out, it involves feedback, but it is only when what is fed back to the learner is used by the learner to make improvements that it counts as assessment for learning. There is a clear distinction between assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning. Assessment for learning, like student voice, runs counter to the way many teachers have come to conceptualise their role and to many of their routine practices in the classroom.

Assessment for learning transfers to the student much of what has conventionally been seen to be the professional property of the teacher: the learning objectives and learning outcomes of a

lesson or activity; the standard of work expected; and the criteria by which the quality of the work is judged. Learners too have to grasp where they are now in their learning; where they are going; and how they might get there.

Conventionally, students perform; teachers assess performance; end of story. Assessment for learning tells a very different story, since through it, three new qualities or skills are developed in the learner.

- The learner comes to hold a concept of performance quality similar to that held by the teacher; that is, acquires his/her own notion of a standard
- The learner monitors the quality of his/her own performance; that is, the learner is enabled to compare his/her actual performance with an internalised standard
- The learner comes to see how the quality of the actual performance can be improved; that is, the learner engages in the action that closes the gap between the performance and the standard

Assessment for learning is not retrospective as is assessment of learning; rather is prospective, driving teacher and student forward. In some respects it is more about feedforward than feedback. In contrast with assessment of learning, it is not an occasional teacher activity that comes at the end of a piece of student learning, but rather a complex, joint activity between student and teacher. The teacher gives the student greater responsibility for learning by simultaneously transferring the knowledge and skills by which such responsibility can be exercised. Not surprisingly, teachers who become expert in assessment for learning do indeed help their students to learn more effectively. This can be demonstrated in terms of conventional outcomes, such as improved examination results and test scores – see the impressive outcomes in key stage three at Seven Kings High School. But in addition students improve their meta-cognitive skills, including learning how to learn. Assessment for learning can be a powerful way in which students get better test results without sacrificing their learning orientation to a narrow performance orientation.

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Through assessment for learning both teachers and students are led to think afresh about the purposes of assessment and marking. They understand better why they are doing what, and how this helps students to learn better. Moreover this can be achieved without extra effort, and sometimes reduced effort. Though the early stages require work, there is a later payoff, for assessment for learning is a teaching strategy of very high leverage – working smarter, not harder, as explicitly understood at Haybridge High School. It involves a rethinking of roles: teacher becomes pupil and pupil becomes teacher as they put it at Valentines High School.

There is a clear link with student voice in that students are being helped to articulate their learning needs and difficulties to themselves, to their peers and to staff. In schools where assessment for learning is embedded, student voice finds its rightful place, as being at heart about teaching and learning and then secondarily in a wider context about the school environment, school life and school governance.

Questions

Through the key stage three strategy there will already be some activity in your school on assessment for learning. What is the depth and quality of this? How well embedded is it in different subjects? Has it affected teaching and learning in key stage four and post-16?

How well are the three qualities and skills, described above, embedded in the routines of classroom life? How will you find out?

In what ways are you monitoring the impact of assessment for learning on (i) student learning, its character and quality, and on (ii) student performance in tests and examinations?

How is assessment for learning affecting student and teacher roles? What do they feel about it?

Have you informed and involved parents in assessment for learning developments? Will they be satisfied that they are getting proper reports on the achievement and progress of their children?

What is the role of student voice in advancing assessment for learning?

Chapter 5 Assessment for learning: stepping stones

Question-and-answer sessions are ubiquitous in classrooms. They are supposed to help students to learn, but they rarely do. Rather, they are a kind of oral test because most of the questions that teachers ask are closed, having a clear, factual answer that can be quickly stated and evaluated by the teacher as right or wrong. So the structure of such a session is a set of triads that take one of two forms:

- teacher asks (closed) question
- student (designated or selected volunteer) replies
- teacher evaluates the reply

or, when this ideal pattern fails,

- teacher asks (closed) question
- no student replies or the reply is incorrect
- teacher asks a different student or rephrases the question.

There is some feedback from the teacher to the students' responses, but it is usually simple evaluation, a kind of immediate summative assessment. It is not assessment for learning, which demands that there be some forward impact on the next steps in teaching or learning. Most q-and-a sessions are oral checks on what students already know. The right answers to the questions are predetermined in the teacher's head: the task of the student is to articulate, even guess, the answer the teacher is seeking. Oral tests can have some value, such as maintaining student attention, but we should not pretend that they do much in the way of advancing learning.

The big problem for teachers is that a q-and-a session needs to be conducted with some pace. If it is not kept moving, there will be silences and such spaces invite boredom or, much worse, active deviance. So the questions are often closed, because making them open requires pupils to think out their answer, which will introduce a dangerous silence. For the same reason, the teacher cannot afford to wait long for an answer. In fact, most teachers wait for about one second – though when asked for their wait time most teachers mistakenly claim that they wait for several seconds. Indeed, they have become so practised in this way of conducting q-and-a sessions that they find it extremely difficult to do what at first sight sounds relatively easy: ask more open questions and increase the wait time for an answer.

Teachers' wait time is students' think time. If the wait time is short, one cannot expect much in the way of thinking. When questions are open, they are more difficult to answer, thus requiring more thinking time by the learner, so the teacher has to learn to tolerate the inevitable pause or silence or fill it appropriately ('This is a difficult question. Take your time. Everybody think carefully about it.'). When teachers adopt this approach, they tend to move out of the traditional q-and-a session into a more participative discussion by adopting new tactics, as follows.

Force thinking time. 'Here is a question you are not allowed to answer in less than 15 seconds.'

Bounce the questioning to students. The teacher turns to the class and asks 'Do you agree?' or 'What do you think of X's answer?' (but not only when X's answer is wrong!). This forces students to evaluate, not merely witness, the response of a peer and decide whether they agree; and if not, what a better answer might be.

Obtain an answer (right or wrong) and then set a problem based on the assumptions of the answer ('If this is true, then how would you...?') This initiates a deeper and more sustained discussion that does two things: first, it exposes the level of student (mis)understanding on which further teaching may be built; and secondly it allows students to develop and expand on the contributions of fellow students. Students thus acquire skills of

peer tutoring, which increases their discussion group skills of listening and collaborating.

Get students to ask questions of one another, and to evaluate and debate the answers. This effectively puts learners into a teaching role, through which they have to develop views of what constitutes a competent answer to any question. For example, if two different answers are offered, students can explore the one they prefer by seeking elaboration of the proffered answers, which exposes strengths and weakness in the two lines of argument. This is what at Seven Kings High School is called snowballing. Students who cannot answer a question are encouraged to 'phone a friend'.

Set a problem to the class that requires a grasp of the knowledge and skill that a traditional q-and-a session would probe. The problem can then take the form of an open, higher-order question demanding a longer and more complex answer than is possible in a speedy oral test of memory.

Note that increasing the wait time to three seconds increases both the number of students who offer to respond and the thoughtfulness of responses. When students are not rushed into an immediate answer, they will enjoy and feel more confident in handling a difficult question and are less likely to panic into either frozen silence or a wild guess.

2. Marking work

All teachers quickly learn that when work is returned to students, their first reaction is to look at the mark or grade, quickly followed by making a comparison with that awarded to other students. The comments made by teachers are the real feedback that is intended to be formative, but they are often given scant attention, which often undermines the care with which these have been formulated. In short, assessment for learning is sabotaged by student obsession with summative marks/grades.

True assessment for learning requires the teacher to take an obvious but by no means easy step: remove the distractor of marks or grades and offer feedback with comments only. When this is done, usually without much objection from students, they begin to

take the comments seriously as an opportunity to reflect on the quality of their work and the teacher's proffered help on how they might close the gap between the desired standard and their current performance. And as students start to take the comments seriously, then teachers attend to and improve the quality of their comments with specific guidance on what action is needed to achieve improvement. Note that removing the marks or grades is effective only when the students' task and the associated assessment criteria are explicit and clearly understood by students. This is at the heart of personalising learning. This is what leads to learning gains, because the student both knows what to do and is gaining in meta-cognitive control over thinking and learning.

As Paul Black and his colleagues report: 'Gradually, both teachers and learners became more familiar and more skilful in dealing with comment-only marking and, as they did so, the classroom culture began to change. They all came to understand that it was worthwhile putting in the effort to work with feedback by comments because they could sense that learning was improving. The comment provided the vehicle for personal dialogue with each learner about his or her work to which the learner could respond. However, the development was more important than that because the teachers came to realise that they needed to create learning environments that supported and fostered good learning behaviours in their students.'

3. Student self-assessment

If assessment for learning, as defined earlier, is working, then the students have internalised much of what the teacher is supposed to be doing in conventional conceptions of assessment. So why not seek explicitly to aid this process of internalisation?

It is likely that self-assessment skills are best acquired through prior experience of peer assessment. Once students have understood the goals of an activity, they then have to judge the extent to which fellow students have actually reached these goals. This immediately requires students to develop an appropriate language and conceptual apparatus with which to talk, debate and argue about the quality of work and learning. Peer assessment is an exercise in student voice.

The criteria for judging the quality of work have to become explicit before they can be either debated or applied. It is possible for students to use formal schemes, based on the national curriculum levels or GCSE grades, or to invite students to invent their own marking schemes. In both, students will need early help from the teacher – which itself amply demonstrates that students do not normally understand what is really meant by a quality performance and how to judge it appropriately. For most students, this is a deep change in their role for which they need:

- access to the criteria by which a desired performance can be recognised and judged
- access to examples of work that meets such criteria
- opportunities to explore the kinds of activity that meet the criteria
- opportunities to set questions that elicit work to meet the criteria.

By looking at the work of another student in terms not of the mark awarded by the teacher but of what quality criteria the work is meeting, students can be led to deeper reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of their own work. As part of their self-assessment students can ‘traffic light’ their work, with a green icon for areas they think they fully understand, orange for areas they partially understand and red to indicate a tenuous grasp. If many students indicate orange or red, this shows the teacher where more explanatory class teaching is in order. It is when students readily expose, rather than hide, their weaknesses that teachers can personalise learning.

Assessment for learning means changing the way one thinks about teaching, about the role of teacher, and about what constitutes good teaching and a successful lesson. As with student voice, assessment for learning cannot be introduced by every teacher into every classroom simultaneously by mandate. Rather, it needs

- backing in principle from the head and school leaders
- a group of committed staff to develop the new practice and show that it works

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- the necessary support and CPD for staff to learn the new skills and abandon previous practices.

Assessment for learning operates in different ways for different age groups. Some have mistakenly assumed that it is just for students in key stage three. At Seven Kings High School (Essex) they have shown how advanced versions can help sixth-form students, promoting independent learning and sound preparation for higher education. Over the years this school has created an impressive learning and teaching policy, within which the assessment aspects are driven by assessment for learning; it is an indicator of how the school has changed its culture.

At Matthew Arnold School (Oxfordshire), the intention was to change the script about what it means to be an effective teacher. Assessment for learning was seen as a path to the broader goal of enhancing the quality of teaching and learning by skilfully combining increased lesson observation with an improved professional dialogue about teaching and learning. There was a strong focus on planning lessons in order to achieve specified learning outcomes. Assessment for learning was developed through a segmented form of distributed innovation (see Personalising learning: next steps in working laterally, chapter three):

- science: opportunities for student to reflect
- maths: student self-assessment
- RE: teacher publishing mark scheme ahead of marking
- MFL: response partners
- English: group marking of student work
- history: whole class reviews.

Departments started with just the one strand that best fitted them. All strands were covered, but no single department had to work with more than one. At a later stage, these developments could be shared, with lessons learned from those who had pioneered each strand, so all strands became the property of all.

In the words of Adrian Percival, the head: ‘We were pushing responsibility for assessment onto the pupils much more; and we were pushing responsibility for making sure that learning outcomes are met onto the teachers; so we have a whole force-field working in the same direction.’ Levels of student achievement rose.

At Haybridge High School (Hagley, Worcestershire), assessment for learning was developed within a wider goal of improving learning – one that included students as researchers on a project to investigate boys’ underachievement – and of helping both staff and students to work smarter, not harder. Assessment for learning was initiated by a small self-selected group of staff working on six strands:

- sharing learning objectives with students (eg lesson title in the form of a question)
- helping students to know and recognise the standards they are aiming for (eg pupil-speak versions of mark schemes)
- involving students in self- and peer-assessment (eg traffic lights)
- providing feedback which leads students to recognise their next steps and how to take them (eg no grades except in summative tests)
- promoting confidence that every student can improve (eg allow thinking time – ‘no hands up’)
- involving both teacher and students in reviewing and reflecting on assessment information (eg students taught review skills).

They accepted help on a professional training day from one of Medway schools where Black and Wiliam started the original work. Before long, assessment for learning became a key ingredient of their school improvement plan.

At Valentines High School (Essex) they started small, again with a segmented form of distributed innovation – two people from four departments (English, science, history and drama), each pair working on one stepping stone (questioning, peer and self-assessment etc.) with one class. Building from the core group to transfer new practices across the staff in all departments was a

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difficult journey, demanding use of formal structures in the later stages, including rewriting the school's assessment policy, now with assessment for learning at its heart. Teachers developed new forms of dialogue about assessment with one another, and with students. They used questionnaires to discover both how students felt about the strategies being adopted in classrooms and what effect assessment for learning was having on their learning. This boosted students' confidence and commitment as they felt they had something to teach the teachers. In retrospect, some staff concluded that if they were to undertake the process again, student voice would be given a greater role and at an earlier stage.

All these schools emphasised that they are still on a journey: not every teacher is as involved in assessment for learning as is desirable; not every lesson uses assessment for learning to its full extent. All of them started small, with a group of committed staff to develop the new practices and provide the evidence needed to engage other colleagues. In each school progress has been made, for students and for teachers alike, but the journey for both continues. As Mary James concluded in the final plenary of the October 2004 conference, 'the processes of assessment for learning for students also describe the processes of teaching – identifying where you are, where you need to go, and how best to get there. For there are parallel processes in student learning and teacher learning. That shouldn't be surprising as we are all learning.'

Questions

Which stepping stones are most appropriate to your school in developing the assessment for learning gateway?

Are there ways in which in your school you can distribute innovation in assessment for learning in a segmented form?

Are there resources in this pamphlet on which you might draw to help you move forward?

Has your development of assessment for learning led to changes in your formal assessment policy?

Students, like teachers, are more influenced by their peers than by outsiders. Teachers are also influenced that new practices really do work when students testify to this. So to what extent could and should students play a much bigger role in transferring practices of assessment for learning (i) within your school and (ii) to both students and teachers in schools other than your own?

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Personalising learning

iNet is publishing a series of pamphlets on the nine interconnected gateways that lead to personalising teaching and learning

- Curriculum
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