



# How one teacher learning community is embedding formative assessment

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**One key factor in formative assessment is to allow pupils more time to reflect on their learning and take appropriate action.**

Sir William Borlase's Grammar School is one of 70 active participants in SSAT's Embedding Formative Assessment (EFA) project. Following the national launch where Dylan Wiliam presented the project's aim and objectives, my task was to establish and run the two-year project here.

Thinking back to our school's launch of EFA at the beginning of October 2015, my initial fears of staff resentment at yet another 'initiative overload' turned out to be unfounded. True, there were initially a few questions from unconvinced colleagues who felt they'd seen it all before and didn't have anything to gain from the project. Some were concerned at losing valuable time in the nine monthly after-school meetings of teacher learning communities (TLCs) - the project's vehicle for enhancing and embedding new practice via small groups focused purely on practising

|         | Where the learner is going                                | Where the learner is                                                                      | How to get there                               |
|---------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Teacher | Clarifying, sharing and understanding learning intentions | Engineering effective discussions, tasks, and activities that elicit evidence of learning | Providing feedback that moves learners forward |
| Peer    |                                                           | Activating students as learning resources for one another                                 |                                                |
| Learner |                                                           | Activating students as owners of their own learning                                       |                                                |

Figure 1: The five key strategies of the Embedding Formative Assessment Project  
(Source - Dylan Wiliam - EFA launch project)

and embedding core formative assessment techniques.

But concerns were countered by other colleagues, both experienced and new, who were excited at the prospect of 'acting their way into a new way of thinking, rather than thinking their way into a new way of acting'. This has become something of a slogan at school, and the feedback from each session so far has borne this out.

### How we set up the project

Given our commitment to 100% involvement for all full-time teachers and as many part-time teachers as could attend sessions, we wanted to ensure

that all colleagues felt they could contribute on an equal footing. So we encouraged some newer colleagues to volunteer as TLC leaders, and we allocated colleagues across TLCs to make sure we had a good mix of HoDs, levels of experience and cross-departmental representation. Our TLC leaders' initial anxiety at leading groups with more experienced colleagues has given way to enthusiasm all round. It's great to see a senior HoD learning from observing an NQT in a different department, and pairings for observations and best practice being set up not just within TLCs but also across them.



Our TLCs are thriving to such an extent that we're using the model as the basis for all our Inset training from next year onwards. There's no doubt that the value of quality time to focus on what we're here for - to improve teaching and learning - has developed new ways of working at school. Teachers are more willing to take risks with new techniques. Feedback from colleagues shows some honest assessments on what worked and what didn't, as well as a willingness to persevere and improve.

### What we've done so far

We've seen plenty of examples of techniques being tried, tested, refined and observed. No hands up, entrance and exit passes, learning logs and triangles of learning have been popular, along with no comments marking and peer assessment. Teachers' feedback on their personal progress has been insightful, and it's really rewarding to see how much the students have risen to the challenge of taking more responsibility for their own

learning. Some colleagues have tried out different techniques each month; others have focused on practising a particular technique that they want to get better at; and yet others have 'mixed and matched'. All these approaches are valid, and appear from colleague feedback to be working.

### What we've learned

Evidence of progress is seen via peer-to-peer observation and regular learning walks by SMT and TLC members. But perhaps more memorable and insightful are colleagues' personal reflections on what they've learned when using the techniques. Here are just a few examples:

#### On 'no hands up':

- » 'This boosts the confidence of less able pupils, even if it was daunting at the outset.'
- » 'It was harder than I thought – needs teacher willpower and rigid discipline! But the pupils were patient, and although their progress felt slower, it felt surer.'

- » 'There is more knowledge and potential in the class than I had let thrive before.'

#### On peer marking and assessment:

- » 'It's viable – and can be more effective than teacher assessment for certain kinds of work.'
- » 'Some pupils struggle to self-critique constructively, but they need to be encouraged and to persevere.'
- » 'Once they've tried it, they like sharing ideas on how to progress.'

#### On learning logs/triangle of learning:

- » 'Well worth doing.'
- » 'Better use of learning time – but leave enough time for it!'
- » 'Greater number of pupils now reflecting on their achievement and how to improve.'
- » 'Greater engagement now – pupils are learning to think for themselves.'

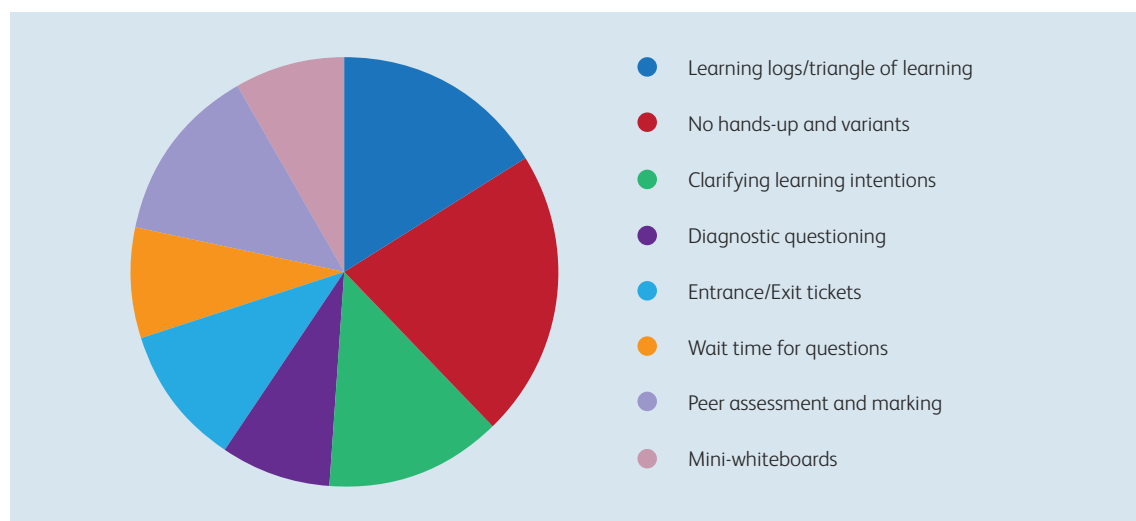


Figure 2: the top 8 EFA techniques used in a 3-month snapshot at SWBGS. The techniques cover all 5 project strategies



### **What we're doing less of**

The project rightly recognises that in focusing on improving core teaching and learning, something has to give. A snapshot of colleague feedback suggests we're doing less of:

- » teacher talk – to fill a quiet space
- » answering your pupils' questions – you're getting them to work it out for themselves or 'phone a friend'
- » marking tests
- » teacher-led lessons
- » marking with grades
- » rushing through the material

- » quick finishes to lesson (achieved through better planning to enable an effective learning review).

But we're also finding that in trying out the new techniques we need more time to allow pupils to reflect on their learning and take appropriate action. We all recognise that it takes quality time to experiment, refine and adapt current techniques and adopt new ones. The project's central aim and its two-year timeframe allow us to do just that.

### **What we're doing next**

After the first quarterly review, we're looking forward to the remaining sessions this year. Progress is being fed into our

revised teaching and learning policy. A key role for the TLCs is to give their recommendations as to which of the EFA techniques that they have used should be embedded in departmental and whole school formative assessment policies.

We're also focusing on bringing our parents fully on board with the aims of the project. Parents will see less traditional marking and more teacher/student learning dialogue, as students become more skilled owners of their own learning. Parental communication at parents' evenings and in report writing is being adapted to become even more relevant to the learning behaviours we want the students to adopt.