



Not just embedding, but also empowering, through formative assessment

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Claire Black, Curriculum Leader, Biology with TLR3 for teaching and learning, Skipton Girls' High School, shows how formative assessment can inspire staff and students alike.

I was excited when our assistant headteacher introduced me to the SSAT Embedding Formative Assessment (EFA) project, which I would lead on in school. The project sounded closely aligned with our approach to CPDL. This has a real focus on developing teachers' knowledge and skills through collaboration, is closely linked to teaching and learning, and comprises ideas and strategies that can be translated to the classroom. Moreover, I remembered learning about Dylan Wiliam's 'black box' while studying for my PGCE some eight years earlier. Assessment for Learning (AfL) was one aspect of pedagogy that really resonated with me.

After an initial meeting with our SSAT lead practitioner, we planned the schedule for our Inset sessions. These would give staff the opportunity to engage with materials and resources underpinned by Wiliam's many years of world-renowned educational research. Then, they would work with colleagues to plan, implement, evaluate and refine approaches to AfL in their own classrooms.

Staff were very receptive towards the project, recognising that formative assessment is critical in the current climate of curriculum reform and linear assessment, with students' memory skills and application of prior learning being of increased importance.

Volunteers lead workshops

Following a suggestion by our lead practitioner,

while I led an overview of the project and planned (using the resources in the pack) and delivered the launch session, I sought volunteers to lead subsequent workshops. This gave staff wishing to further develop their own leadership skills the opportunity to become something of a specialist on one aspect of AfL, as well as using all the strategies to improve students' learning experiences. We asked staff to select, in order of preference, the formative assessment strategies they would like to focus on initially, with a hinge-point halfway through the first year to allow teachers to switch their attention to a second strategy and enhance their repertoire of techniques.

All staff wanted to focus on 'providing feedback that moves learners forward' and 'activating students as owners of their own learning' (self-assessment), so the teacher learning communities (TLCs) that were established grouped them according to how they had ranked these two strategies. While there were, inevitably, some staff from the same subject area working together, there was also a demonstrable keenness towards establishing cross-curricular pairings, driven by teachers' own professional goals and the learning needs they perceived in their students. Staff shaping their own professional learning according to their interests, aspirations and students is a real advantage offered by the SSAT project. It is structured enough to allow for standardised methodology yet flexible enough to be personalised for a school's, department's, or staff member's development priorities.

A key part of the process is teachers jointly observing each other's teaching, to reflect on the effectiveness of the different techniques used

in lessons and inform the subsequent evaluation and refinement of these approaches. Staff found it really beneficial to work with colleagues from outside their own curriculum areas, which enabled them to consider how the techniques affected students' learning, unconstrained by subject-specific ideas about what traditionally does and doesn't 'work'.

Exploring the effect

As well as peer learning walks, staff were keen to engage in paired work scrutiny to explore how the strategies translated into students' written work and were demonstrated, for example, in students' responses to their teachers' comments. Again, the project was, I was reassured by our lead practitioner, adaptable to allow for this additional layer of collaboration. And it's true. Teachers openly and actively seek feedback and share good practice through work scrutiny. This emphasises how encouraging and non-judgmental the whole project is and how completely our teachers engaged with it. They value its potential to further improve their own lessons through refinements of teaching and learning methods that are manageable but have impact.

Our enthusiastic TLC leaders seized the opportunity to add to the workshop materials with outcomes from their own further in-depth research

around the strategies. From the start, the TLCs had a lively atmosphere engendered by on-task discussion. They led to an inspiring showcase event in which groups of teachers presented their work and findings to those with whom they had not yet collaborated. As a result, the positive outcomes of the strategies, and suggestions for how they are best used with our students, could be more widely disseminated and adopted.

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Following the first year of the project, staff feedback showed that teachers valued the activities they'd used with students, which improved their abilities to accurately assess whole-class understanding and to more quickly identify students needing extra support. Even a very experienced teacher with a leadership role was inspired and reinvigorated:

"The workshops got me excited about AfL again. Each meet-up encouraged me to set myself a challenge; to come up with an innovative AfL strategy,

to trial it out, and to assess its effectiveness. It was fun to try new approaches, and it was interesting to evaluate their success and then tweak them for reevaluation. It was motivating to add new strategies to my belt, and also to see just how effective a particular strategy could become if tweaked enough”.

Staff also reported that the project:

- » has helped students to focus on how to make specific small-scale improvements to access additional marks or aspects of assessment
- » has shifted the responsibility for improving work from the teacher more to the student
- » has helped to aid discussion among students so that learning could happen at a much faster pace.

We believe the strategies are having a huge impact on student achievement and progress: students can clearly identify the mistakes they have made and respond well to the feedback given in particular ways as a result of the project. The techniques used have also helped examination classes to improve their revision strategies and engage in metacognitive approaches to their learning. Staff credited the ‘activating students as owners of their own learning’ element with making lessons more interactive and increasing enjoyment of learning.

Year 2: specific learning challenges

Keen to refresh the project for its second year, we decided to give staff the opportunity to review

and build on their work by extending their application of formative assessment techniques to a specific learning challenge in one of their own classes. Working in pairs or triads to a lesson study model, each teacher has identified a class to focus on and has jointly planned and delivered a diagnostic lesson to confirm the presence of the perceived challenge.

Teachers suggested additional aspects of formative assessment they wished to learn more about, informing the planning of the workshop I delivered using materials designed for year 2 of the project, such as those around hinge-point questioning and ways of using success criteria. Some also wanted to revisit ideas which had been explored by staff to varying degrees, depending on their own interests and priorities, in the previous year.

Project outcomes

The EFA project has provided an invaluable opportunity to engage with materials written by Dylan Wiliam and those published by SSAT. It has inspired experienced and new teachers, including ITE students completing placements at our school, to place AfL at the centre of their practice and to share ideas throughout the school. The project gave a clear focus to one strand of our teachers’ CPDL, and further stimulated staff’s eagerness to engage in lesson study.

