

A return to assessment for learning

Back to the future

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With the upcoming review of the National Certificates of Educational Achievement (NCEA) and the removal of National Standards, it is time to reconsider how we approach assessment. In this edition of Assessment News I argue that it is time to put assessment for learning (AFL) and the assessment-capable teacher and student “front and centre”. We need to move from a preoccupation with summative assessment to an approach that promotes the powerful and agentic learning that is meant to be the heart of our national curriculum.

Over the last 30 years or so teachers have increasingly been asked to play a key role in our assessment systems. For the National Certificates of Educational Achievement (NCEA), secondary school teachers are expected to design and implement internal assessment systems that can be used to determine how well students have achieved against achievement or unit standards, or both. Until recently, teachers in our primary schools were required to categorise students as well below, below, at, or above the performance expectations described by the National Standards for reading, writing, and mathematics. Now teachers and kaiako are required to draw on quality assessment information to “evaluate the progress and achievement of students and build a comprehensive picture of student learning across the curriculum” (Ministry of Education, 2018).

Benefits and pitfalls of teacher-led assessment

There are potential benefits associated with teacher-led assessment. Teachers can assess a wide range of learning outcomes—not just those that can be examined in paper-and-pencil tests. Teachers can also assess students in more authentic contexts and do this over multiple time points. When assessed in their normal classroom settings, students can avoid the anxiety that is often associated with exams and tests and provide more valid indications of what they know and can do. Another benefit is the possibility of professional learning for teachers as they engage in designing assessment approaches that consider how well students have met the objectives of their programmes.

Achieving these kinds of benefits can't be taken for granted. When assessment in the classroom is preoccupied with summing-up achievement, we often end up seeing the classroom turned into a kind of mini exam centre or testing station. Assessment becomes a series of regular events designed to generate the grades or levels needed for reporting. Often the assessments lack imagination and simply mirror traditional external assessments. In addition, teacher workloads become difficult to manage and students' stress levels rise. Perhaps the worst effect is the impact on learning. Students can become more concerned with extrinsic rewards (such as collecting credits) and how they compare with others or an externally defined target (well below, below, at, or above) than their own personal engagement in and commitment to rich learning.

The promise of assessment for learning and assessment capability

One way we can avoid falling into this kind of assessment trap is a strong (re)commitment to what in the early 2000s became known as assessment for learning (AfL), and which, more recently, has led to the idea of the assessment-capable teacher and student (Booth, Dixon, & Hill, 2016). AfL and assessment capability are fundamentally concerned with using assessment to improve learning and wherever possible co-constructing the assessment process with students. A British assessment "think-tank", the Assessment Reform Group, listed seven characteristics that define AfL. These are that it:

- is embedded in a view of teaching and learning of which it is an essential part
- involves sharing learning goals with pupils
- aims to help pupils to know and to recognise the standards they are aiming for
- involves pupils in self-assessment
- provides feedback which leads to pupils recognising their next steps and how to take them
- is underpinned by confidence that every student can improve
- involves both teacher and pupils reviewing and reflecting on assessment data. (Broadfoot et al, 1999, p.7)

Research indicates that assessment can be linked to large achievement gains when it is used effectively in the classroom to promote learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998). The "back-and-forth" of regular classroom activity allows myriad opportunities for teachers and students to be involved in AfL through listening, observing, probing, discussing, and also reviewing written work. Compared with summative assessment, AfL is less concerned

with precision and exactness because it is ongoing and embedded in contexts where teachers and students can check their interpretations and adjust their thinking and decision making as needed.

Putting summative assessment in its place

This is not to say that summative assessment isn't important. All stakeholders in education (e.g., students, parents, schools, employers, and the government) want to know how students are doing. It also matters that summative assessments are fair, and that they adequately describe the learning they purport to represent. Moreover, they should produce results that are consistent for a wide variety of students.

The challenge is not to let the summative assessment agenda predominate. Instead, information generated through AfL should inform summative judgements when they are required. When this occurs, it is important that the information is revisited and re-evaluated against a set of common criteria which outlines how the summative reporting levels are defined. Teachers can use the criteria to make judgements about their students' levels of achievement, drawing on the best information generated over time and taking into account progress students may have made in their learning. A test or grade is not needed at each step of the way.

One way to support this re-evaluation process involves teachers and students working together to develop collections of evidence generated from their learning experiences. The evidence contained in the collections can be used to inform summative judgements. This need not be a formal collection process. For example, the Progress and Consistency Tool (PaCT) provides an illustrated framework that teachers can use to re-evaluate what they have learnt through typical classroom interactions. Teachers use the framework to make a series of judgements about a student's progress. The PaCT tool combines the judgements to locate the student's level of achievement on a progress continuum linked to curriculum expectations.

Part of this re-evaluation process also involves teachers working together (in and across schools) to ensure they have a joint understanding of the criteria that define achievement at various levels and how this manifests in students' work. This is sometimes referred to as social moderation. It is also important that activities related to constructing collections of evidence and being involved in social moderation don't themselves undermine or dominate learning time or unduly increase teacher workloads.

Conclusion

The need to produce robust summative information has traditionally led to assessment systems that rely heavily on standardised testing and examinations. This approach has been strongly criticised for narrowing the curriculum and promoting anxiety amongst students (Harlen & Deakin Crick, 2003). In New Zealand we have asked teachers to take on a summative assessment role as a way to mitigate these negative impacts. However, realising the benefits of a teacher-led assessment system involves much more than simply moving the exam room into the classroom. It requires a strong commitment to AfL and assessment capability approaches that provide space for teachers and learners to be immersed in rich and purposeful learning. Achieving this requires a coordinated system-wide approach with implications for national and school-based assessment policy, professional development and learning, initial teacher education, the design of our qualification systems, and how we construct professional standards for teachers and principals. We can't afford to just hope for the best.

As we move into a future filled with exciting opportunities as well as significant challenges we need to be bold and make a comprehensive return to a system that supports the AfL and assessment capable agenda. Meeting the vision of our curriculum requires imagination, innovation, and a strong commitment to the kind of assessment that enables powerful learning, and enhances the wellbeing of students and teachers.

References

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