How do students respond to assessment for learning?

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What were students’ perceptions of assessment for learning?
Assessment for learning (AfL) is becoming increasingly commonplace in schools – research such as Black and Wiliam’s (cited in the study's extensive literature review) has shown that AfL should be an important feature of classroom teaching and learning and that it can raise achievement. Less is known about student perceptions and experiences of AfL however. According to the researchers, paying attention to students’ perspectives and their experiences of formative assessment is important if we are to implement and use AfL effectively.

Using a combination of observation and interview this New Zealand study asked students from ten Y7-10 science classes about the things they did in relation to assessment for learning and the things the teacher did which they thought helped their learning. The researcher reported findings about:

- how teachers found out about student learning;
- what students considered to be useful feedback;
- how students engaged with assessment for learning; and
- what impact students felt assessment for learning had on them.

The students in the study indicated that they were aware assessment was embedded in, and accomplished through, routine classroom interactions with both peers and teachers. They considered themselves to be active participants in classroom assessment interactions. They were aware too that in their interactions they had both intellectual and social goals. This study’s findings will help teachers develop their understanding of their interactions with and responses to students and the ways they can help their students to learn.

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How does assessment for learning work?

What does assessment for learning aim to achieve?
Assessment for learning (or formative assessment) is different from other forms of assessment because it aims to enhance learning rather than measure it.

What factors are needed to make it work?
Teachers (and students) use feedback from learning to modify future teaching and learning activities. Students and teachers come to share criteria for success in the subject which then become an aim for the student which s/he can self-monitor. Students need to be willing and able to take action in pursuit of these goals.

Are there any barriers to success with assessment for learning?
This type of assessment practice relies on teachers developing in their students an orientation towards ‘learning’ as distinct from ‘performance’. The study also highlighted the further complication that students are motivated by social goals (such as establishing relationships with teachers and peers) as well as academic goals. The author suggested that student dispositions are not fixed and can be changed, by, for example, the way teachers give feedback and the type of feedback given.

How did students perceive opportunities for teachers to find out about and extend their learning?

The majority of students in the study identified a number of ways that teachers found out how much they learned. These included:

- tests and assignments;
- teachers talking with and questioning them;
- teachers observing them; and
- teachers reading and commenting on their written work.

Many students felt that their teachers had not assessed their thinking if they had not ‘come around’ to talk with them and question them during a lesson:

Researcher: Do you think your teacher found out anything about your thinking today?
Student: Not really. She never really came around to us. (Boy, Year 10)

Significantly most students viewed these occasions as opportunities for them to engage in learning with their teachers. The students used them to clarify task instructions, confirm their ideas were correct, ask for help to complete tasks and make sense of their own ideas etc. All the students wanted more opportunities for this kind of interaction with their teachers.
What sorts of feedback did students value and why?

When students were engaged in learning they preferred feedback in the form of suggestions rather than comments such as ‘very good’. Other aspects of feedback which students found helpful included:

- teachers using a language students understood;
- feedback in the form of suggestions; and
- teachers revisiting ideas and explanations in class.

Some students said they wanted teachers to use ‘plain English’ and avoid ‘big’ words, although they recognised that more complex language, including more ‘sciency’ terms might be better for some students.

Students reported that evaluative, positive comments (such as ‘very good’) were of limited value in terms of improving their learning, although they enhanced their motivation and persistence with tasks. They wanted teachers to explain what it was that made a piece of work good, but not excellent etc. Negative comments (such as ‘that’s not right’) undermined their views of themselves as learners and were received by students as put-downs.

Students valued suggestions because they supported their active engagement with learning and communicated respect. They also offered students new perspectives:

“She came round and looked at everyone’s work and asked if they did understand and perhaps said ‘Oh well, maybe if you tried it this way or that it may work better’...” (Girl, Year 10)

In contrast when students were focused on performance and task completion they did not respond well to teachers probing their understanding:

“I hate it when you ask how to do something and they ask us questions back. They [teachers] should just tell us what to do so we can get on.” (Boy, Year 10)

Students felt encouraged to ask for help when teachers showed a willingness to revisit ideas and explanations. They also considered that by doing so the teacher was conveying the importance of the idea. Students’ comments indicated that willingness to revisit ideas was an aspect of teacher behaviour they assessed early in the school year which then subsequently influenced their own inclination to pursue ideas they didn’t understand.

Evidence from the study showed that students favoured one-to-one or one-to-group interactions with their teacher as they felt that s/he gained a better understanding of their ‘level of understanding’ and could ‘target problem areas’ more effectively.

How did students participate in assessment for learning?

Interviews with students showed that they were active participants in formative self-assessment and that they did so on their own initiative. They explained how they used whole-class discussions to reflect upon and monitor their own ideas, including:
• checking their understanding against other sources of evidence – teacher, text, expert peers; and
• assessing the consistency of their own and others’ explanations.

Many students were inclined to ask friends first and only if that failed to ask the teacher. In some cases there was a complex interplay between peers’ suggestions, sometimes based on misunderstood empirical evidence, and the teachers’ authoritative explanation. As one student explained:
‘Can I make sense of what they [teacher or student] are saying or does so and so’s idea make more sense? And can I understand the idea when she puts it that way or when the teacher puts it another way…’ (Girl, Year 10)

Many of the students regarded it as essential to ask questions when they didn’t understand and showed great patience and determination in doing so, although there was also evidence to suggest that in some cases they felt embarrassed or belittled by the teacher’s response: “The worst thing is when you ask a question and they [the teacher] belittles you in front of everyone and goes ‘Weren’t you listening?’ or ‘Don’t you understand that by now?’” (Girl, Year 10)

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How did students interact with teachers?

Classroom observation during science lessons and interviews with students suggested there were two kinds of learning interactions. In the first, students used teachers’ feedback to make sense of ideas, as this example shows:

Student: You...check your own [ideas] just to see if whether what you’ve said is clear enough or whether what they’re saying is making more sense than yours. You might be thinking it their way but not being able to put it down on paper in the words that you want. (Girl, Year 8)

Secondly, there were occasions when students wanted only information from the teacher in order to help them complete a task.

Students’ comments also suggested that cognitive, affective and social consequences of participating in AfL overlapped. For example, students asked questions as a formative action for academic learning, but they had other reasons too, including:
• seeking help in order to complete tasks so that they kept the teacher ‘happy’; and
• extending question and answer interactions with their teacher even when they had understood the ideas in order to minimise their workload or to impress the teacher.

Some students were clearly concerned that their questions might make their peers regard them as ‘dumb’, ‘stupid’ or ‘slow’. Others perceived a problem at the other extreme, that they might be regarded as a ‘try-hard’ in the eyes of their classmates. A lack of trust within a classroom could lead students to limit how much thinking they wanted to disclose through questioning. Consequently, peers and trusted teachers were a preferred source of help.

When the teacher provided feedback students felt that this was a measure of respect for them as independent learners; they were teachers ‘who respected the way you want to learn’ or who
‘let you learn by yourself’. In turn students’ respect for teachers who provided this kind of feedback grew.

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How did the researchers collect their data?

The study had two stages. In the first stage thirty-one students from ten classes (at least three students per class) were interviewed to find out their views of AfL. The students were asked about:

- how they decided they had learned something
- what their teachers did to find out about and help them with their learning
- what they did when they did not understand something.

Stage 2 involved an in-depth exploration of the classroom assessment practices that supported learning. Each class was observed for a science unit lasting 3-5 weeks. Seventy-five students (at least six students from each of the ten classes) were interviewed after their lessons to find out their views and experiences of how their teachers had found out about their learning and how they had responded, and the students’ experiences of assessment during the lesson. The students were interviewed individually or as a group depending on their preference. Over half the students were interviewed more than once.

The researcher attempted to make her interpretation of the data trustworthy through combining observation and interview data and through asking the students to check her analyses.

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What are the implications?

In completing this digest, the authors began to ask the following questions about implications for teachers and school leaders:

For teachers

- Would it be helpful for you to consider strategies for AfL which you can put into practice in your own classrooms, such as:
  - creating more opportunities for talking with students about their work and encouraging them to ask questions to help clarify their thinking;
  - providing students with suggestions for ways they could improve work alongside positive feedback to enhance their motivation and persistence with it; and
  - encouraging dialogue which offers students opportunities to reflect upon and monitor their own ideas (for example during whole-class discussions)?
- When implementing AfL strategies would it be helpful to ask a colleague to observe and feed back to you about specific features of classroom interaction such as questioning and answer techniques, feedback, etc. You could then reciprocate the activity if your colleague wished.
- Evidence from this study suggested that the teachers themselves were still developing their experience of AfL. Would it be useful for you to look further into the ideas underpinning AfL and the experiences of teachers who have already engaged with AfL
and tested some of the strategies? The section on further reading contains a number of helpful references.

- Students’ comments in this study, for example, in relation to trust indicate that the students are not used to AFL. Would it be helpful to train your students in good habits of dialogue by talking through and establishing ground rules? A number of recent studies have explored this issue (see Where Can I find Out More?)

For school leaders

- This study illustrated that teachers vary in their individual starting points when it comes to professional development and learning, such as that required by AFL. Would it be a good idea to develop the strategy incrementally by starting with more confident teachers and arranging peer coaching to extend the activity?
- Would it be a helpful approach to developing AFL in your school to develop teachers on a whole school basis by making it part of the school development plan and planning professional development with AFL as the main theme, perhaps drawing on external expertise to provide initial input?

Where can I find out more?

On the web

The Literacy Trust
The Trust provides short summaries of a range of reports, articles and publications on the theme of formative assessment/assessment for learning, in addition to links to the actual resources: http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/Database/assessment.html

Written resources


Black, P. et al. (2003) Assessment for Learning - putting it into practice, Buckingham: Open University