

# An essential component of formative assessment education essay



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The statement in the title of this assignment comes directly from Black and William's (1998) seminal work *Inside the Black Box*. This publication built on the work of others (Klenowski 1996, Boud 1995, Sadler 1989) to make the case for the more widespread adoption of formative assessment strategies in education by providing evidence from a large scale review of published research that formative assessment improves learner outcomes. Briefly, for the purposes of this work I use formative assessment (FA) to mean "assessment that learners receive / self-generate during the learning process that enables them to learn more effectively". This contrasts with summative assessment which I define as "assessment which takes place at the end of the learning process that demonstrates a degree of attainment". Twelve years on, and with a substantial body of research behind it, formative assessment or assessment for learning, is now a well established pedagogical policy at national level, with the *Assessing Pupil's Progress* the latest initiative designed to embed the principles of FA in the classroom.

In considering the statement above it is necessary to first review the theories of self assessment in the literature and then to consider the evidence for its "essential" inclusion in formative assessment. Would, the effectiveness of FA be significantly reduced where self-assessment not a component of it? I will reflect on my school-based experiences and consider how my personal observations affect my opinion.

## **Literature review**

Formative assessment had been a focus of academic interest for some time before *Inside the Black Box* was published. Sadler (1989) asked the question why, even when teachers give students accurate timely judgements on their

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work does improvement not always follow? He concluded that “ for students to be able to improve, they must develop the capacity to monitor the quality of their own work during actual production”. Crooks (1988) investigated the relationship between classroom evaluation practices and student outcomes and believed that careful planning was required in these practices to create the desired outcomes. Similarly, work by Butler (1988) showed how students, if given a mark and written feedback, tend to react solely to the mark, ignoring the feedback. But with its systematic review of over 250 research articles it is the work by Black and William (1998) that has had the biggest influence in the area of formative assessment in education. Their research supported the assertion that FA improves outcomes for learners and particularly for lower achieving students. Further evidence both in the UK and internationally of the positive relationship between FA practices and learning outcomes followed as more teachers implemented FA in their lesson. The Assessment Reform Group was established by leading researchers in the field to conduct large-scale assessment studies and “ to ensure that assessment policy and practice at all levels takes account of relevant research evidence” (ARG website). Educational policy-makers began to take notice and policy decisions started to reflect the perceived importance of formative assessment techniques:

“ Assessment for learning is a powerful way of raising pupils’ achievement. It is based on the principle that pupils will improve most if they understand the aim of their learning, where they are in relation to this aim and how they can achieve the aim (or close the gap in their knowledge). It is not an add-on or a project; it is central to effective teaching and learning.” (DCSF 2008)

## Self Assessment literature

The concept of feedback is central to FA and researchers early on recognised that this feedback should not just come from the teacher but also from the students themselves through both peer and self-assessment opportunities. Early studies focussed on the validity and reliability of student self-assessment, in some ways viewing it as a summative exercise. Higher Education establishments were early adopters of self-assessment techniques and the sector quickly moved on to study the process of self assessment rather than information it generated (Boud 1995). The consequences of introducing self assessment in the classroom were investigated; for example the changing role of the teacher, the need for training both of students and teachers in the skill of assessment, and the role ICT could play in self assessment (Boud et al XXX, Nicol and Mcfarlane-Dick 2006; ). Sebba et al. (2008) conducted the first systematic review of research evidence on the impact of self-assessment and peer-assessment strategies on achievement and found that these strategies increased levels of student attainment, self esteem and engagement.

### **Self Assessment: An essential component of formative assessment?**

According to Harlen (2009) formative assessment is “ a complex combination of inter-connected practices and positive impacts may not result unless teachers come to understand the underpinning principles”. Few who have researched this topic would contradict this statement. In determining the validity of Black and Williams’ assertion that self-assessment is an essential technique of formative assessment it is vital to consider the other parts,

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together with the overall aims of formative assessment. I consider the aims of formative assessment to be:

Students know the intended learning outcomes – both short and medium term

Students are taught skills in how to learn effectively – i. e. meta-cognition

Students become more responsible for their own learning path using metacognitive skills

Teacher acts as a support and guide to students in their learning

Student acts as a support and guide to other students in their learning

Some of the techniques or tools I believe that are needed to achieve these aims are given below:

Providing opportunities for discussion

Good quality questioning

Sharing and revisiting objectives

Being observant

Target setting – teacher and student

Feedback – teacher, peer, individual

Note that I make no attempt to match the techniques to the aims as this is too complex a relationship to model here.

If self-assessment was not deployed in the classroom as a pedagogical technique would the other tools of FA deliver effective learning? I believe they would. However, with self-assessment learning, in my view, becomes more personal and therefore more permanent. This is I believe due in large part to the change in classroom culture that self assessment opportunities bring - student assessment is actively sought and value is given to it, the balance in responsibility for learning is shifted more towards the student. Sebba et al. (2008) in their review of research on self assessment found evidence of " increased pupil attainment, improvements in self esteem and increased engagement with learning, often referred to in the literature as aspects of ' learning to learn'. It is interesting that they also noted " no clear differences emerged between the effects of self and peer assessment".

### Classroom Observation

To support my view that self assessment is vital, I reflect on my teaching experiences in a Year 10 Chemistry class on teaching placement in School X. I taught the class once a week for 6 weeks and planned and delivered lessons that I felt used most of the techniques I have listed above: discussion; questioning, objective sharing, group work etc. The students responded to questioning well, completed practicals efficiently and completed discussion and paired work when asked to do so. The feedback I received from observers for these lessons was good. However, I did not sense that the class were actively engaging with the work and a review of their books confirmed this. Notes taken in class were strictly limited to information they were specifically instructed to record. Despite me creating what I believed to be engaging, thoughtful, creative lessons little of the extra <https://assignbuster.com/an-essential-component-of-formative-assessment-education-essay/>

information had been recorded. Clearly the class felt that learning was something 'done to them' by the teacher and that their responsibility to be proactive learners was limited.

For my last lesson with the class I changed approach and asked them to research and create information on a particular topic for themselves in the form of a poster. Each pair was given a design brief and resources were made available. Although many pairs were initially slow to begin and needed a considerable degree of support throughout, by the end of the class work had been produced. We reviewed a selection of the posters and I invited comments on what they felt was good or could be improved. I also stressed the validity of the range of different approaches that had been adopted. One example poster they reviewed was from a student with significant behavioural problems - it was excellent. For me, confirmation that peer and self assessment is essential came from the very able pair who had devoted the entire lesson to creating a title for their poster. The realisation of how their work compared with this exemplar piece was evident in their faces. There was no need for me to provide any external assessment on their work. They already had done so internally.

Research has shown that teacher feedback can be difficult to interpret by students (Black and Harrison 2001; Higgins et al 2001). Conversely, generating feedback through peer and self assessment activities is highly effective in constructing meaning for students and promoting learning. But, as Sadler (1989) pointed out, this is only the case when students have three things: (1) a clear understanding of what constitutes good work (2) the necessary skills to evaluate their own work against this and (3) " a store of <https://assignbuster.com/an-essential-component-of-formative-assessment-education-essay/>

tactics or moves which can be drawn upon to modify their own work”.

Defining the criteria or creating the exemplar work that students need to evaluate their own work against is in my view relatively straightforward.

More difficult is teaching students the higher-order skill of evaluation and I consider this more fully next.

## **Teaching the skills of assessment**

Rolheiser and Ross (2010) assert that “ the choice for teachers is not whether students evaluate their own work (they will regardless of teacher input) but whether teachers will attempt to teach them how to do so effectively”. This thought is echoed by Sadler (1989): “[students] must already possess some of the same evaluative skills as their teacher”.

Similarly, Sebba et al (2008) found that:

“ Studies identified the crucial need for students to receive some training in self assessment and to understand the terms and concepts which they are expected to use to assess themselves. While this has implications for building self and peer assessment into the national policies, it also suggests the need to build these processes into day-to-day activities in classrooms.”

(Sebba et al. 2008)

As a pre-service teacher I feel that I have a high degree of empathy in this area with my students – my assessment skills are still underdeveloped, the memory of struggling to make sense of levelled task descriptors is still fresh and the complexity of, for example, Assessing Pupils Progress documentation is still daunting. The ability to evaluate is critical in the process of learning and authentic opportunities must be given for students to



practice this functional skill little and often. Activities such as peer evaluation of work e. g. two stars and a wish, assessing team contributions at end of group work, self evaluation against an example piece of work are excellent ways to develop the skills required.

The direct relationship between a clear understanding of learning goals and meeting these goals is well researched (Locke et al. 1981). A key skill of self-assessment is target or goal setting as it is these learning goals that students critically evaluate their progress against. Targets that appear to the student to be imposed upon them do not resonate as strongly as those that they have helped to define - learning is less personal (Orsmond et al. 2000). Equally, without practice and training student-derived targets can lack clarity and realism. Evidence suggests that target setting should ideally be a shared activity between teacher and student(s) " negotiating intentions enables teachers to help students set goals that are specific, immediate, and moderately difficult, characteristics that contribute to greater effort" (Rolheiser and Ross 2010). In my teaching practice in two schools I have used sets of commercially available externally-defined criteria, for example level descriptors, to assess work in a range of class ages and abilities. The descriptors were given to the students to refer to when self or peer marking their work. I found that the students continued to be uncomfortable using them, particularly those with weak literacy skills, and that they struggled to judge the quality of their work accurately. On reflection, I believe there would have been much better learning outcomes had I spent time working with the students to redefine targets in their own words. Doing this first goes to the heart of what self-assessment really means.

## Classroom implications

In addition to the need to teach the self of assessment explicitly there are other implications of using self assessment in the classroom. Importantly, the activities need to be valued, planned for and given time (refXXXX). In my class of mixed ability Year 7s on teaching placement in School X, I discovered that Exit Tickets were an invaluable way for me to gain a snapshot of student learning. This allowed me to address misconceptions quickly and change future lessons to accommodate my understanding. Once I understood the value inherent in the activity I ensured that I gave it sufficient time when I used it again.

As with many formative assessment techniques, in using self assessment the teacher must be sensitive to the relationships and dynamics of the class, and to the subtle changes in the teacher's student role that non-teacher assessment activities will inevitably bring about (Naylor and Keogh 2007). Learning becomes more student centred. Daws and Singh (1999: 78) identified this change in ethos early on stating that good formative assessment requires "fostering collaboration, democratic discussion that critically appraises the process of learning and assessment".

## **Beyond Self assessment**

Self assessment is a powerful technique whose effects cannot be reproduced in any other way. I agree with Black and William's statement – giving opportunities for self assessment is an essential component of formative assessment. But does this statement go far enough? I do not think so. Self assessment is an essential component in learning and in life. For some time

both employers (CBI 2009) and higher education establishments have argued that secondary education “ produces inadequately prepared learners” (Nel et al. 2009) that lack the skills they need to succeed in the 21st century. The Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) initiative was launched in 2008 in response to this criticism with the aim that students should become equipped with more general skills that would enable them to become lifelong learners. The ability to self-assess learning is specifically included in the framework under the title Reflective Learners – see Appendix A. While it is beyond the scope of this assignment to examine this topic in any detail, it is worth noting the view of Klenowski’s (1996) that in the context of learning, the term “ self-assessment” is too narrow, she and others favour “ self-evaluation”. However, it is the principles of social cognitive theory provide much greater detail – specifically the concept of “ self regulation”.

### Self regulation

Self-regulated learning is a constructivist concept that describes how students approach a task, apply strategies to complete it, monitor these, and assess the outcomes of their efforts (Paris and Paris 2001). Zimmerman and Schunk (2001) use the term “ self regulated learning (SLR)” thus:

“ SLR involves goal directed activities that students instigate, modify and sustains; for example attending to instruction, processing information, rehearsing and related new learning to prior knowledge, believing that one is capable, and establishing productive social relationships and work environments. SLR fits well with the notion that rather than being passive

recipients of information, students contribute actively to their learning goals.”

To me it is clear that self regulation and not simply self assessment is an essential component of formative assessment (Boekaerts and Corno 2005). Self regulation extends the concept of self assessment to the student (1) knowing who to seek help from with learning, (2) actively managing their learning environment and (3) maintaining levels of motivation. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2005) use the concept of self-regulation to emphasise the central and active part students play in the feedback process that promotes learning - see Appendix B. Crucially, there is evidence to suggest that learners who are more self-regulated achieve more (Schunk 2005) and that all students can become better at self-regulating their learners with practice. Schunk and Zimmerman 1994 found that self regulation could be developed by “ structuring learning environments in ways that make learning processes explicit, through meta-cognitive training, self monitoring and providing opportunities to practice self regulation”.

## **Conclusions**

Self-assessment is not a luxury but, rather, an essential component of formative assessment. Evidence, including my own experiences on teaching practice, suggests that students make greater progress when they are actively engaged in their learning. Self assessment activities help to promote greater engagement. Evidence also suggests that students are confused by teacher-generated feedback and that peer and self feedback is more readily interpreted, assimilated and acted on. Students need to learn the process and skills required to evaluate their work. Likewise, teachers need to

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understand the pedagogical basis for self-assessment in the classroom.

Evaluation skills once developed are readily transferable to employment and higher education, and secondary educators, I believe, have a duty to value them in their classrooms promoting the concepts of self-regulated learning.