An enquiry into the use of assessment for learning

Since the Education Reform Act (1988), introduced national testing to monitor school standards of education assessment has continued to play a major part in the educational delivery in schools. Assessment encompasses all aspects of teaching that measure the level of teaching through students understanding and achievement. Assessment is not just end of year examinations but an on-going process that should be present in teaching at all times in order for lessons to be effective. Through several studies (Assessment Reform Group (ARG), 2002; Black et al, 2003; Clark, 2005) it has become evident that through careful planning of assessment it is possible to promote students learning and motivation, by using a more formative approach as opposed to high stakes testing of summative assessment.

It is often noted that teachers ask questions to check students' understanding of the lesson but take a simple acknowledgement as a valid indication that learning has occurred. Students are often not confident or willing to identify themselves as not understanding. It is therefore important for teachers to carefully plan strategies for assessment both formative and summative to identify what students have learnt to plan for future lessons (Capel, Leask & Turner, 2009). It is important to consider different formative assessment methods and their suitability to the learning objectives or particular learning styles of students. Kyriacou (1998) suggested that supporting learning activities with assessment should be of a more subtle approach.

This enquiry will focus on various methods of AfL that can be employed by a teacher in order to raise student's attainment, motivation towards learning

and engagement throughout lessons. AfL plays a key role in teaching and pupils learning, providing continual feedback to students on their level of attainment, where they are succeeding and where they need to improve, giving them information on how to progress further. Through AfL, we as teachers provide continual advice and feedback in the forms of positive reinforcement to constructive dialogue through questioning, to enable students to demonstrate a deeper understanding of the subject promoting cognitive development. This study will focus on the use of AfL within the chosen unit of work as the Office for Standards and education (Ofsted) (2005, 2008a) identified, AfL as the weakest part of teaching and learning, in particular a weak area for student physical education teachers (Ofsted, 2003). It is of key Importance as a student teacher to understand the application of AfL, as several studies have identified that the use of assessment is key in developing future learning opportunities having an impact not just on their attainment but also their attitude to learning, their engagement with the school subjects and their motivation to do well (Black and William, 2001; Black et al., 2003).

This enquiry will focus on the delivery of a year 7 boys dance scheme of work delivered over six lessons. When planning the unit of work several factors including knowledge of the learner's ability, my knowledge of the subject, curriculum knowledge and pedagogical knowledge were all identified as aspects of a teachers personal subject construct. It is important as a teacher to not allow your personal constructs and views of a subject to exclude pupils with different views, (Banks et al., 1999 cited in Capel, Leask & Turner 2009).

A framework was provided by the school indicating the learning objectives for each lesson and progression over the unit of work. Through discussion with members of staff with previous experience of delivering the unit of work it helped to increase my subject knowledge and ideas for possible learning activities to incorporate into my lessons. The study school had a well-structured pupil assessment strategy modelled from the national curriculum level descriptors (appendix 1), which was key in designing learning objectives and provided a clear indication of what the students should be working towards. With this information and a brief overview of the classes' ability it was possible to start designing the learning objectives for the unit of work. It was important to ensure that my learning objectives were varied across the key processes of physical education to ensure students could demonstrate and develop a variety of skills not merely there physical ability as Ofsted (2002 cited in Capel) raised concern over the weakness in pupils' skills of observation and evaluation due to limited opportunity to develop these skills.. The study school had a big focus on incorporating learning objectives into normal lessons based on Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) to develop these skills as well as a focus on PLTS in year 7. They clearly understand the importance of raising students' abilities as team workers, independent enquirers, reflective learners, independent enquirers, creative thinkers, self-managers and effective participants in order for students to access the curriculum and progress with greater success as laid out by the PLTS National Curriculum Framework (QCDA 2011).

When planning to integrate AfL into lessons it is key to acknowledge the ten research based principles of AfL identified by the ARG (2002) into classroom

based practice (Appendix 2). As suggested by Black et al (2003) the implementation of specific assessment strategies can increase students learning, increase motivation and enthusiasm towards a subject. Spackman (2002 cited in Capel and Whitehead 2010) identified four characteristics of AfL in relation to physical education as shared learning objectives, questioning, feedback and pupil peer – and self-assessment. The sequence of lessons were planned to incorporate an aspect of all four assessment strategies to ensure all students were provided with an opportunity to gain a further understanding of their learning and to provide a wider spectrum of tools to identify students level of ability. Each lesson was structured in three phases, the initial being the identification of a new skill or recall of previously learnt skills providing opportunity for sharing learning objectives and questioning, the second phase would be a performance where students would practice ad rehearse the newly learnt skill under the teachers guidance which provided opportunity for feedback, questioning and self/ peer assessment and finally the third phase of appreciation where students would focus on peer assessment providing feedback to each other. The lessons focused on the key processes identified in the Key stage 3 National Curriculum for Physical Education.

Throughout the delivery of lessons it was not always possible to follow the unit of work as students had not always made sufficient progress to move onto the next learning phase. Therefore lessons were modified based on the previous learning that had occurred to continue the progression smoothly and to ensure learning objectives were not too demanding for the learners'. The importance of AfL in forming objectives for learning was emphasised in a

report by Ofsted where the chief inspector wrote: ' Accurate assessment is used to identify focused objectives for learning and is a basis for choosing suitably challenging tasks and resources' (Ofsted, 2007).

Through the delivery and observation of the first lesson it was clearly identified that effective questioning was used to recap on learning from previous lessons, to ensure student understanding of learning tasks, and to assess students understanding and accomplishment of learning objectives. It is important to question a variety of students' not always the ones with hands up as several studies have suggested adopting a no hands up policy in which all students are then required to formulate an answer as to the teacher will pick randomly and to ensure students understand that the an incorrect answer is part of learning and they should not be afraid to ask questions themselves to gain clarity. This also provided opportunity for students to discuss with their peers to formulate a possible answer which is beneficial for learning to occur (DfES, 2007). Other research identified that questions needed to be related back to the learning objectives, and to use more open ended questions as suggested by Clarke (2005). Although there was opportunity for peer assessment in the appreciation phase of the lesson this needed to be refined with the use of assessment criteria as identified by Latham (1992 cited in Mawer 1999, pp 242) who noted that in order for peer assessment to work pupils need help in focusing on the specific areas of a skill or process to be assessed. This was later supported by Loose & Abrahams (1993 cited in Mawer 1999, pp 242) who identified that pupils need clear instruction on what to focus on when assessing as shown in the example assessment sheet, (Appendix 3).

Over the course of the following lessons the use of questioning significantly improved combining the use of open ended and directed questioning to recall prior learnt information and assess the students' level of understanding as suggested by Clarke (2005). Learning Objectives were shared with students and discussed at the beginning of the lesson, however the use of questioning could be improved to re-iterate the learning objectives throughout the lesson. Several strategies were used to promote self/peer assessment. One involved students completing a self-assessment sheet (Appendix 4) to identify what they had learnt in prior lessons and also to evaluate what they learnt by the end of the lesson, using a traffic light system for each question as an alternative questioning method to allow greater classroom involvement (Clarke, 2005). Although the content of this assessment has the potential to be a valuable tool it needed to be pitched at a more suitable level to work. Due to the students' lack of understanding as to why they were doing it, their ability level and learning style the teaching strategy did not match the leaner's personality or information processing level as suggested by Harvey, Hunt and Schroder's (1961 cited in Mawer 1999, pp 143) Conceptual systems theory. Based on this research it was noted that maybe due to their low conceptual complexity in terms of information processing they required a simplified system supported by a more structured approach from the teacher as they had not yet developed the capability to generate ideas in a low structured environment (Joyce and Weil, 1986 cited in Mawer 1999, pp 144). This is supported by further research that identified that formative assessment can only work if students' are trained in the skills of self-assessment and questioning so they understand why they are doing it and what they need to do to achieve (Black

& William 2001). As the National Curriculum key stage 3 (assessment pack) states it is at KS3 where students start to take initiative and make decisions for themselves and PLTS are introduced, therefore a careful balance between more structured direct and non-direct teaching styles is needed until these skills are embedded. The use of the traffic light system also provide the teacher with the opportunity to level the class and split the students into groups of differing ability and work on differentiated tasks (Appendix 5). Students were provided with opportunity to assess and provide feedback with the use of video cameras to record and analyse their performance. It was important to provide instruction on what the students should be looking for with reference to the learning objectives when peer assessing as suggested by Loose & Abrahams (1993 cited in Mawer 1999, pp.).

The study later identified through observations that when lesson objectives were shared with the class it was important to consider students learning styles, when providing information and guidance on what they might be looking to observe and demonstrate in order for students to achieve the desired learning outcomes. The teacher adopted the Visual, Auditory or Kinaesthetic (VAK) construct (Dryden & Vos, 2001 cited in Capel, Leask and Turner, 2009 , pp. 262), to implement when planning and delivering (Appendix 5). Throughout lessons various stimuli were used including visual aids by displaying learning objectives, posters and using video footage (Appendix 5).

The teacher incorporated practical demonstrations to explain what they were looking for as opposed to the earlier descriptively heavy verbal instructions, providing students with more time to actually rehearse and practise the new

skills and more time working collaboratively in groups. Through observation it was evident that the use of video footage and practical demonstration had a large impact on the students understanding when used to identify learning goals (appendix 5). As research suggests it is of particular help when learning outcomes are shared in a format that the pupils can understand (ARG, 2002; Black et al; 2003; Clarke, 2005). The use of video recording and ICT was also used to provide students with the chance to watch their own performances allowing opportunity for peer & self-assessment. It is important for students to be able to assess themselves and others in order to have a clear picture of how to move forward and achieve (Black & Williams 2001).

For effective learning to take place teachers must carefully plan structured opportunities for students to develop the skills needed to comprehend a task, analyse feedback, self-assess their performance and be creative in solving problems through the use of AfL. As often as possible learning opportunities should be delivered with consideration of the students learning style for the greatest level of understanding to occur. The implementation of visual aids especially the use of ICT had a big impact on the students' comprehension of tasks and motivation towards learning new skills, developing their ability to analyse a performance and provide structured feedback to their peers. It is clear that Spackman's (2002) four characteristics of AfL provide a basis for planning and implementing AfL strategies but further planning needs to go into how each characteristic is delivered within a lesson to cater for various academic abilities and learning styles. By including an aspect of all the charateristics in a lesson you are able

to motivate, enthuse and help drive students forward. The key to successful teaching comes from the use of AfL on a daily basis to ensure students know what they are trying to learn by sharing learning objectives, helping students recognise success by sharing learning outcomes, providing a success criteria and identify the reasoning as to why they are learning it (DfES, 2007). It is also important to consider that this must be communicated in a way that is understood by the student (ARG, 2002; Black et al; 2003; Clarke, 2005). In future planning the use of questioning needs to be carefully evaluated and planned to provide opportunity for higher order thinking in line with Blooms Taxonomy. Learning Objectives, outcomes and feedback all need to be provided in a language and format that the learners can access, whether it be verbal through use of pictures or video analysis. It is of utmost importance to ensure students are developing the learning and thinking skills in lessons to allow them to access their education alongside the academic objectives of lessons.

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