

Assessment For Learning; Assessment As Learning: Changing Practices Means Changing Beliefs

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As in many countries around the world, Hong Kong educational leaders are reviewing and rethinking its assessment practices. They are exploring on-line assessment platforms as well as building teachers' assessment literacy and working to enhance the feedback provided to teachers and students in the teaching, learning and assessment cycle. *Assessment for learning* and *assessment as learning* are new concepts that have entered the conversation. As with any new ideas, there is some confusion and multiple interpretations of what these phrases mean and what they look like in practice. In this short article, I hope to clear some of the confusion and provide some insights about how *assessment for* and *assessment as learning* work in classrooms.

The idea of *assessment for learning* arose out of a 1998 landmark research paper by Black and Wiliam in which they synthesized over 250 studies linking assessment and learning and found that the intentional use of assessment in the classroom to promote learning improved student achievement.¹ This meta-analysis supported previous research showing that classroom assessment had both short- and long-term effects on learning.²

In the short term, it showed that classroom assessment could:

- focus attention on important aspects of the subject;

1 Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (1998). Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 80 (2).

2 Crooks, T. (1988). The impact of classroom evaluation practices on students. *Review of Educational Research*, 58(4), 438-481.

- give students opportunities to practice skills and consolidate learning;
- guide further instructional or learning activities.

In the medium and long term, assessment held the possibility of:

- influencing students' motivation as learners and their perceptions of their capabilities;
- communicating and reinforcing teaching goals, including performance criteria and desired standards of performance;
- influencing students' choice of and development of learning strategies, skills, and study patterns;
- influencing students' subsequent choice of courses, activities, and careers.

Since that time, it has become obvious that assessment can be a powerful catalyst for learning.

*Recent reviews of more than 4,000 research investigations show clearly that when [formative assessment] is well implemented in the classroom, it can essentially double the speed of student learning... it is clear that the process works, it can produce whopping gains in students' achievement, and it is sufficiently robust so that different teachers can use it in diverse ways, yet still get great results with their students.*³

Assessment for learning shifts the emphasis from summative to formative assessment, from making judgments to creating descriptions that can be used in the service of the next stage of learning. When they are doing *assessment for learning* teachers collect a wide range of data for a different purpose – so that they can modify the learning work for their students. They craft assessment tasks that open a window on what students know and can do already and use the insights that come from the process to design the next steps in instruction. To do

3 Popham, J. (2011). Formative assessment – A process, not a test. *Education Week*, February 2011. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/02/23/21popham.h30.html?t>

this, teachers use observation, worksheets, questioning in class, student-teacher conferences or whatever mechanism is likely to give them information that will be useful for their planning and their teaching. Considering student work is not designed to assign marks and make comparative judgments among the students but to highlight each student's understanding and thinking and provide students with feedback that will further their learning. *Assessment for learning* happens in the middle of learning, often more than once, not at the end. It is interactive, with teachers providing assistance as part of the assessment. It helps teachers provide the feedback to scaffold next steps. And it depends on teachers' diagnostic skills to make it work.

When I wrote the book **Assessment As Learning: Using Classroom Assessment to Maximize Student Learning**⁴, I introduced the notion of *assessment as learning*, a subset of *assessment for learning* that emphasizes using assessment as a process of developing and supporting meta-cognition for students. *Assessment as learning* focuses on the role of the student as the critical connector between assessment and their own learning. Students, acting as active critical thinkers, make sense of information, relate it to prior knowledge, and use it to construct new learning. This is the regulatory process in meta-cognition. It occurs when students personally monitor what they are learning and use the feedback from this monitoring to make adjustments, adaptations, and even major changes in what they understand (p. 47).

Although many teachers would say that they do *assessment for* and *assessment as learning* there is considerable evidence that their assessment practice does not really reflect the intentions and principles that make *assessment for* and *assessment as learning* powerful⁵. I have come to believe

4 Earl, L. (2003, 2013). *Assessment as learning: Using classroom assessment to maximize student learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

5 James, M., McCormick, R., Black, P., Carmichael, P., Drummond, M.J., Fox, A., MacBeath, J., Marshall, B., Pedder, D., Procter, R., Swaffield, S., Swann, J., and Wiliam, D. (2007). *Improving learning how to learn – Classrooms, schools and networks*. Abingdon: Routledge.

that “conceptual change” is at the heart of professional learning if it is to go beyond tinkering with practice. The theories of *assessment as learning* potentially conflict with teachers’ previous conceptions of the purpose of assessment and even their theories of teaching. These shifts challenge some long-standing and deeply held beliefs about what schooling is for and why teachers should collect information about how students are thinking and learning. Because *assessment as learning* is a different way of thinking about assessment, it is unlikely that many teachers will be able to just assimilate it into their practice. Incorporating *assessment for* and *assessment as learning* into practice requires a fundamental shift in the way teachers think about the nature of learning and the rhythm of interactions in classrooms.

The primary aim of *assessment for* and *assessment as learning* is not summative, for grading or reporting; it is formative, to contribute to students’ learning. That means assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning and teachers have the responsibility for identifying aspects of learning as it is developing, using both informal and formal processes, so that they, and the students can decide what to do next to enhance the learning. *Assessment as learning*, in particular, is founded on a belief that for students to become self-motivating and able to bring their talents and knowledge to bear on the decisions and problems that make up their lives, can't just wait for the teacher (or politicians, or salespeople, or religious leaders) to tell them whether or not the answer is "right". Effective assessment empowers students to ask reflective questions and consider a range of strategies for learning and for acting. Over time, students move forward in their learning when they can use personal knowledge to construct meaning, have skills of self-monitoring to realize that they don't understand something and have ways of deciding what to do to next.

Like their students, teachers need to examine their mental models, rethink their practices and develop new skills so that they are comfortable making moment-by-moment decisions on the basis of considered evidence and argument, with student learning as the goal. They need to become adaptive experts who use many effective strategies for teaching, learning and assessment but also have high levels of flexibility that allow them to innovate when

routines are not enough, in order to ascertain when students are not learning, know where to go next, and adapt resources and strategies to assist students to meet worthwhile learning goals⁶.

Understanding the power of *assessment for* and *assessment as learning* and changing assessment practices mean hard new learning for teachers because the shifts require fundamental rethinking of their current beliefs and their existing practice. But, the results are worth it.

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6 Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London, England: Routledge.