

# Assessing grey matters: joint practice development of everyday work in the classroom

## Aim of the project

The purpose of this research was to identify, implement and evaluate, collaboratively with five other members of our A level Business team, assessment for learning (AfL) practices that could best support and develop our students' A level education.

## Dimensions of the study

The research was conducted at the two A level centres of a large further education college with close to 9,500 students and 1,104 members of staff. The study involved six full-time teachers – two from each of A level Accounting, Business Studies and Economics. Each teacher researched one of their AS level mixed-ability, mixed-gender classes of 25 students. The students' minimum expected grades (MEG) based on their GCSE input scores ranged from A to E – but the majority had a MEG of C. A vast majority of the students (94%) were white.

## Summary of main findings

- Students identified aspects of AfL that worked for them
- Students valued opportunities to learn together
- Students became more reflective
- Students improved the quality of their work
- Teachers and students learned more about the practice of AfL

## Background

I work for a large further education college as a Course Leader and teacher of A level Accounting, Business Studies, Economics and Law at one of two main campuses. At the start of the 2009/10 academic year changes were made at a senior level which led to two separate teams of staff merging under one manager. This

reorganisation prompted us to reflect on our teaching and learning and we recognised that we shared the same problem: that our students find it difficult to develop the analytical and evaluative skills needed to engage meaningfully in their A level education.

## Teaching processes and strategies

I worked collaboratively with five other teachers to learn more about AfL techniques. In trying to help students engage more critically with their A level education and become more involved in the assessment process, we created opportunities for them to work in groups and share their ideas as much as possible. They worked collaboratively to discuss what makes a good answer, to write detailed mark schemes and to assess and give feedback on their own and each other's work. We decided to focus on (and implement) four areas of practice that promote assessment for learning.

- *Studying model answers and mark schemes in groups* – we worked with students to identify examples of excellent work and over time we developed a shared understanding of the important characteristics of good writing at Advanced level; writing that shows good understanding of relevant theories – and the application, analysis and evaluation of those theories to a specific business case.
- *Formulating assessment criteria collaboratively with students* – before writing up their work the students worked together to produce a detailed and assignment specific set of assessment criteria, which they felt gave them enough guidance on how to produce Advanced level work.
- *Self- and peer assessment* – we arranged for students to give feedback on exemplar writing, for them to assess their own work, and then to assess each other's work. This helped students take more responsibility for their own education.
- *Structured dialogue* – we encouraged students to ask questions, summarise, clarify and predict rather than rely on us to take the lead on providing information and asking questions.

For the duration of the 12 week research period the role of assessment changed dramatically. It moved from something that both the teachers and the students saw as solely the teachers' responsibility and that was predominantly associated with the giving of a grade on a piece of homework or test, to something that was less formal and more frequent. Assessment became a significant part of, rather than something detached from, the ongoing educational experience.

## The findings

- Students identified aspects of AfL that worked for them

As well as learning how to apply their knowledge of the subject material and how to become more analytical and evaluative, some students were also able to talk about what they learnt about assessment. The common theme that emerged from their

comments was that they now recognised that assessment is not a passive activity (something that is done to them). Their feedback suggested they now appreciate that actively engaging in their learning, by developing the ability to assess their own progress, has empowered them to take control of their education. They felt they could identify what actions may be needed to move on to the next level. To give a sense of the students' experience I have drawn on the comments of three students in particular, each representing a different ability.

Ria (with a MEG of E) talked about how using exemplar answers helped her to appreciate what is meant by analysis in the context of accounting and in turn how it helped her to plan her answer to a recent exam question.

*"When I did my accounting exam recently I was confident that I had answered the ratio analysis question well because before I answered the question I wrote myself a little to do list – based on what I had learned about how to write a good answer from looking at model answers and picking out what made that answer good." (Ria)*

- Students valued opportunities to learn together

The students' comments showed that they found learning from others both enjoyable and useful.

*"Working in small groups to assess each others' work and give each other feedback was particularly useful – and strangely enough really enjoyable. Without so much help from the teacher we have had to get on with things and develop our ideas." (Jon-Paul, MEG = C)*

*"I like the way we do our assessments in business studies now. We work together in groups a lot writing mark schemes, talking about people's answers and what makes them good or bad. Those that take the work seriously come up with some amazing ideas and I think wow I wouldn't have thought of that. I try and remember those comments and use them to improve my own work in the future." (James, MEG = B)*

- Students became more reflective

In helping students take more control of their education by involving them more in the assessment process it seemed we had also helped them become more critical learners in general. Some of their comments on the ways in which they felt our teaching developed over the 12 weeks illustrate my point.

*"You have given us more and more responsibility for our own education which has really helped me with my other subjects as well – when I'm struggling to do something I use the same technique as we learned in economics and try and think about some useful questions to ask the teacher or another student." (Jon-Paul)*

*"I feel that the main change in your teaching following the project is that you have got to know us all as individuals. We seem to get more individual support and feedback within the lesson than we used to. Actually we all seem to know each other better now. It's like when I'm working with someone and they get stuck or make a mistake I can often guess what's happened because I am used to that person's work – having assessed it and given them help before!" (James)*



- Students improved the quality of their work

The students' work was assessed three times during the research period. Their grades suggested they had improved their analytical and evaluative skills and were able to achieve (or exceed) their minimum expected grade.

Ria's, James' and Jon-Paul's progress was typical of many of the 120 students involved in our study.

Name	MEG	Assessment 1	Assessment 2	Assessment 3	January AS Exam
Ria (Accounting)	E	U	E	D	E
James (Business Studies)	B	E	C	B	A
Jon-Paul (Economics)	C	D	C	A	C

At the time of sitting their January exams the students had only experienced the AfL strategies for 12 weeks. Consequently the full impact on their A level grades may not become evident until their June AS exam. For some it may not be seen until they sit their A2 exams. This may help to explain why despite showing improvements in our 3 internal assessments some students did not achieve their expected grade in their January exam (see table below).

Percentage of students achieving their expected grade in the January AS exam		
Subject	Last Year	This Year
Accounting	76%	81%
Business Studies	79%	91%
Economics	73%	71%

- Teachers and students learned more about the practice of AfL

Students initially found AfL quite challenging. This may be because self and peer assessment was not common practice in our lessons before we embarked on this research. Many teachers, myself included, also found assessing students' work and providing useful feedback challenging. However students and teachers found that the process got easier with experience and when discussed with other teachers and students, as this comment showed:

*"I knew what the question was about and I knew what the mark scheme was looking for but trying to assess the work was really difficult. It was easier to get a gut feeling about the standard of the work but to back up that gut feeling and give some useful feedback to say what was good and why and what needed improving and how was really difficult – but actually we all got more comfortable and our comments more useful the more we did it". (Jon-Paul).*

## Research methods

Our data were collected from six AS level classes, two Accounting, two Business Studies and two Economics, using a range of methods:

- three peer observations
- two interviews with an opportunity sample of three students per class
- notes from teachers' and students' reflective learning logs.

In addition we referred to students' assessed work; three different pieces of work from all 120 students involved.

We decided to interview just three students per class – as to interview them all would have been too time consuming. Each student was interviewed twice, once in the middle and again at the end of the 12 week research period. The sessions were semi-structured to allow us to cover the issues and questions we felt needed to be addressed, yet at the same time allowing us the opportunity to explore any unexpected issues that the students raised.

In order to analyse and form an opinion on the effectiveness of the various assessment techniques used during the research period we looked at three pieces of work from all 120 students involved; one done at the beginning, one in the middle and one at the end of the 12 week period.

We met as a team every three weeks to share our findings to date and to discuss and develop our common approach to formative assessment.

## Conclusion

Did we solve our problem? Did the assessment practices our students experienced help them develop their analytical and evaluative skills enough to enable them to engage meaningfully with their A level education? Do we now know how assessment can help students take more control of their learning? I would say that helping students to improve their understanding of their education is not about giving them simple solutions; it is about helping them to make intelligent choices. I would suggest that the AfL practices we implemented promoted independent thinking and therefore helped students develop their analytical and evaluative skills.

I would also suggest that the more learners know about and experience AfL the deeper their understanding of their subject material becomes, making their educational experience more challenging and enjoyable. In researching their own classrooms, other teachers, like ourselves, may also become more reflective practitioners, more informed learners and therefore more informed teachers.

## Suggestions for further reading

Biesta G (2009) *Good education in age of measurement: on the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education*. Available at: <http://www.springerlink.com/content/42763204qm11h5v5/fulltext.pdf>

Black, P, Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B. & William, D. (2002) *Working inside the black box: Assessment for learning in the classroom*. London: School of Education, King's College.

Coffield, F. (2008) *Just Suppose Teaching and Learning Became the First Priority*. London: Learning and Skills Network.

Watkins, C. (2001) 'Learning about Learning Enhances Performance', in School Improvement Network's Research Matters 13, Institute of Education, University of London



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