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Harnessing the Power of Feedback in Assessment for Learning

Assessment for Learning (AfL) originates from Black and Wiliam's (1998) initial research into the role of formative assessment in the classroom and its positive impact on pupil achievement. However, with assessment's 'traditional' connotations of testing and exams (Wiliam, in Stewart, 2012), along with the government's increasing push for progress and "higher standards" (ARG, 1999, p.2) the original intentions of Assessment *for* Learning have become confused with Assessment *of* Learning. This is particularly evident when we consider the government's misleading interpretation of AfL, which proposes a strategy based on summative assessment and measureable progress through national curriculum levels (DCFS, 2008). In fact, Torrance (2011) points to the potentially disastrous effects of the tension between two opposing desires: to improve current assessment practices to help enhance learning and "policy [which] demands for school improvement and political accountability" (Torrance, 2011, p.464).

Just as AfL has been subject to much "misinterpretation" (Swaffield, 2010) leading to the "distortion and denaturing" (Burch, 2016) of its original aims, so too have the strategies and principles within it. We currently find ourselves trapped within a "performativity" (Ball, 2003) culture; forced into "an existence of calculation" (Ball, 2003, p. 215) which pushes teachers into 'teaching to the test' or, as Davidson (2007) claims, into "educat[ing] by numbers". In the classroom, this translates into the teaching of what Dadds (2001) referred to as a "hurry-along curriculum" (Dadds, 2001, p.49), and a tendency to focus on attainment rather than achievement goals with a view to moving on to the "next level" (Stobart, 2012, p.239) and preparing for performance in "high stakes" tests (Harlen, 2012, p. 176). This "tick-box culture" (Boyd, 2012) could go some way to explaining why many teachers seem only able to adhere to the "letter" rather than the "spirit" of AfL (Marshall & Drummond, 2006, p.133) in the hope that AfL will provide them with a quick-fix solution and it is this attitude which seems to be equally prevalent when examining the application of theory on effective feedback, leading to much destructive practice (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

The provision of effective feedback is central to AfL. Its pivotal role becomes clear when we refer back to the ten principles of AfL drawn up by the Assessment Reform Group (ARG, 2002); it is clear that effective feedback encompasses the majority of these principles: considering pupil motivation, promoting "understanding of goals and criteria", and providing "constructive guidance" in a sensitive way since "any assessment has an emotional impact" (ARG, 2002). Indeed, the central role of feedback is equally apparent in the original definition of AfL:

the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there. (ARG, 1999, p.2; 2002)

An important aspect of AfL is that learners become more involved in their own learning by responding to feedback, which in turn helps them to become more autonomous and responsible learners. Teachers must gauge their pupils' understanding and provide feedback in order to find ways of bridging the gap between their current understanding and the next step in the learning process. It is easy, however, to see how formative and summative assessment can become amalgamated.

Feedback is a vast and somewhat controversial topic, not only because there are various ways of providing feedback but also because of the variety of factors at play (Stobart, 2012, p.239). Feedback is inextricably linked with pupil motivation and self-esteem and for this reason it is highly individual in nature. As Stobart (2012) points out "the same feedback given to two learners could have opposite effects" (Stobart, 2012, p. 239). Thus, giving effective feedback is a highly complex skill to master. In fact, although feedback has been shown to play a crucial role in pupil learning, "its impact can be either positive or negative" (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p.81).

For the purposes of this essay, I will concentrate on teacher – pupil feedback within AfL as well as discussing the potential impacts of such feedback on pupil learning, relating this, where appropriate, to my own experience. The key issues I will explore include: creating a learning environment that is conducive to effective feedback, whether to use praise when giving feedback, how mindsets affect motivation and making feedback useful.

A climate for feedback

If we look at the etymology of the word 'assessment' (Swaffield, 2011, p. 434) coming from the Latin 'assidere' meaning 'to sit beside' the true purpose of what Swaffield (2011) refers to as "authentic" AfL becomes much clearer; it is not about gauging pupil performance from a distance. Instead it is about being in a supportive dialogue, with the teacher in a guiding role and who is constantly assessing and re-assessing her pupils so that she can provide them with the help and support they need. Indeed, Wiliam (cited in Stewart, 2012) admits that one of his biggest mistakes was his failure to emphasize the fact that pupils "aren't going to get it all the time"; hence the crucial role of effective feedback in AfL.

For Black *et al.* (2002, p. 9), feedback must be as specific as possible, outlining both positive and negative aspects of the work and providing clear indications of how to make improvements. The ARG (1999, 2002, 2003) and Black *et al.* (1998, 2004) underline the importance of providing pupils with high quality, "non-judgemental" (Harlen, 2006, p. 111) feedback that highlights problematic areas within their work, giving them "a clear understanding of what is wrong and achievable targets for putting it right" (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p. 6).

Feedback over praise

Unfortunately, a common misconception is that an important part of feedback requires us to praise our pupils when praise can actually have a multitude of

negative consequences (Didau, 2015; Dweck, 2006) including making our feedback “ego-enhancing” (Butler, 1987), so that praise can work in much the same detrimental way as providing scores. Didau (2015) highlights that the “problem with praise” is that it is not always sincere and is “always judgemental” (Didau, 2015, pp.330-1). Both Dweck (2006) and Boyd *et al.* (2015) warn of the dangers of the “wrong sort of praise” including its capacity to instil “a fear of future failure” in pupils (Boyd *et al.*, 2015, p.100) and to be seen as patronising (Ur, 1991, p. 257; Didau, 2015) and even manipulative (Kohn, 2001) making it counterproductive. When the teacher-pupil relationship is good, praise becomes unnecessary. (Boyd *et al.*, 2015, p.52; Ur, 1991)

The impact of mindset on motivation

Feedback should attempt to encourage what Dweck (2006) coined a “growth mindset”. Indeed, Wiliam (2011), just like Dweck (2006) and Boyd *et al.* (2015), suggests that we should attempt to provide our pupils with feedback that “supports a view of ability as incremental rather than fixed” (Wiliam, 2011, p.119) so that they come to understand that through effort they can achieve. When pupils understand that they have control over their academic destiny, it pushes them to take responsibility for their own learning and gives them a “powerful sense of agency” (Boyd *et al.*, 2015, p.50). As Harlen (2012) points out, when motivation is intrinsic “it is more likely to lead to a desire to continue learning” (Harlen 2012, p.173) and so feedback is likely to have more of an effect.

When is feedback useful?

Kluger and DeNisi’s (1996) study into the effects of feedback show us that feedback should be treated with caution. Wiliam (2011) points out that feedback is only effective if it is used so that pupils can make improvements and that it “should be more work for the recipient than the donor” (Wiliam, 2011, p. 129) which, unfortunately, is often not the case. This means that teachers need to allocate sufficient time in lessons to allow pupils to respond to feedback (Black *et al.*, 2002, p. 9) so that a feedback loop can be established. This is why Wiliam (2011, p. 129) suggests that we should be selective about when we give feedback since we need to build response time into our lessons.

However, even when given the time and space to respond to feedback, pupils can still remain disengaged. One way of combatting this, Wiliam (2011, p. 130) suggests, is to separate the comments from the work so that groups of pupils have to help one another to select the correct corresponding feedback that goes with each piece of work.

Moreover, Wiliam (2011, p. 130) warns of the negative effects of providing too much feedback, which can actually have the opposite effect to that which we would expect by encouraging pupils to ignore comments because they are too overwhelming and so the learning opportunity is missed. In an “age of measurement” (Biesta, 2009), quantity equals quality and this common misconception has led to teachers feeling pressured into providing such detailed commentaries of their pupils’ work that pupils and teachers alike are ‘drowned’

in the “flood of feedback” (Quigley, 2014; DfE, 2016). Thus, Wiliam (2011) argues that “less is often more” (Wiliam, 2011, p. 130) and, like Didau (2015) suggests that we should focus on “reducing feedback” (Didau, 2015, p. 249) with a view to making *less* comments *more* specific. In the past, my own tendency has been to ‘over-comment’; Didau (2015) suggests that one way of reducing feedback is to ask pupils to indicate which parts of their work they would like feedback on or feel unsure of; then, the teacher can then focus on these (Didau, 2015, p.256).

In conclusion, feedback is central to AfL; if nothing else, teachers should attempt to “do no harm” (Haydn, 2013) when providing feedback and this feedback should “cause thinking” (Wiliam, 2011, p.127) in the recipient. Only then is there a possibility that it will be taken on board and have the potential to make a positive contribution to a pupil’s learning. Moreover, if feedback is to be effective, there must be a solid teacher-pupil relationship based on trust.

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