

# Creating Lifelong Learners



Educating for today  
and tomorrow

2nd Edition

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# Assessment for learning

Wyden and Vos noted, "for the first time in history, anything is now possible" (2001: 22), so we must ensure that we meet the challenge of learning environment by innovation and creativity founded on the varied views of all parts of our school community. Whether, as in the School of the Future, we have the opportunity to build a flexible, learning environment founded on the latest technology or, as in the case of the Franklin Science Academy in Philadelphia, we open in a refurbished office block, we can develop our environment to meet the learning needs of our students. Our environment can inspire and challenge learning but it cannot replace the essential human relationships that underpin effective learning.

Assessment for Learning has established itself as one of the most successful educational initiatives in recent years. The suggested benefits accruing from this method include the following:

- ▶ an increase in pupil motivation
- ▶ the capacity for more beneficial teacher feedback
- ▶ more student engagement with self- and peer-assessment
- ▶ the ability to set realistic and productive goals
- ▶ regular monitoring of progress.

The *IB Learner profile booklet* sets out what IB learners at all stages should strive to be—it is worth reminding ourselves of its first cardinal principle, that learners need to be inquirers:

*They develop their natural curiosity. They acquire the skills necessary to conduct inquiry and research and show independence in learning. They actively enjoy learning and this love of learning will be sustained throughout their lives.*

(*IBO 2009: 5*)

How should this be achieved? How should we inculcate such skills in the minds of young people? In short, how do we create independent learners? How can we explore the challenge of developing independent learners in terms of assessment? To begin with, some considerable thought needs to be given regarding student contribution in the classroom:

*A chief goal of teaching and learning should be the promotion of learners' independence and autonomy. This involves acquiring a repertoire of learning strategies, developing positive learning dispositions, and having the will and confidence to become agents in their own learning.*

(*James, Pollard 2006: 9*)

The problem for teachers is the difficulty of creating, trialling and compiling such a repertoire. The IB also recognizes some of the issues confronting teachers and asks:

*In formative assessment tasks, do we provide students with enough opportunities to take intellectual risks, and then support them in taking such risks?*

To what extent does the range of assessment strategies we use meet the diverse needs of students and encourage creative and critical thinking?

Can we provide time for students to reflect on an assessment task and what they have learnt from it?

What aspects of students' development do we report on? (IBO 2009: 3)

Following the research of Ruth Butler (1988), Paul Black and Dylan William make a telling point when they observe that:

*While students' learning can be advanced by feedback through comments, the giving of marks does not usually help and, moreover, has a negative effect in that students ignore comments when marks are also given.* (2003: 411)

This certainly echoes our experience as students ourselves—the higher the mark, the better we were and, correspondingly, the lower the mark, the worse we were. Often, only as one advances beyond school do comments begin to assume the significance that is at the heart of formative assessment—to help create an independent learner who is able to reflect on his or her learning in a way that enhances it.

Over the past few years a key psychological factor has emerged in influencing levels of maturity and disaffection in almost all levels of society, including schools: the 'locus of control'. This concept is closely linked to others, such as self-esteem and self-efficacy, and it is rapidly becoming a key factor in developing students' motivation and engagement. Students are, after all, active rather than passive participants in the learning process. There is, however, a need to introduce a cautionary note—high self-esteem does not always guarantee high motivation, nor is it always essential for self-motivation. Schools must not focus on the nurturing of self-esteem at the expense of developing learning. Students should consistently receive constructive guidance about how to improve by:

- ▶ pinpointing the student's strengths and advising on how they might be developed
- ▶ clearly and constructively addressing any weaknesses and how they might be improved
- ▶ providing opportunities for students to improve their work.

In a sense, all this begs two questions: to what extent has formative assessment, or "assessment for learning", been the poor relation to assessment of learning? And how far have teachers been able to develop the

skills needed to use assessment for learning effectively? Across many countries, standardized testing has come to rule the roost. This has usually been associated with a prescribed curriculum that almost always sets great store on the twin pillars of literacy and numeracy. This is particularly evident in both the UK and the USA and has often resulted in a punishment-reward strategy and a narrowing of the curriculum in order to provide more time for literacy and numeracy activities. A 2007 report by the US Center on Educational Policy noted that "44% of districts reported cutting time from ... social studies, science, art and music [and] physical education" in response to pressures from standardized tests (McMurrer 2007: 1). Meanwhile, in the UK, evidence suggests that schools have narrowed curricula to ensure more students reach the magical five A\*-C levels at the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). Despite some relaxation of the summative assessment culture, it remains a central plank of policy in the UK, where a range of tests and examinations serve as both gatekeeper qualifications for students and accountability tools used to judge schools and teachers.

Moreover, it remains unclear how far approaches to assessment for learning have permeated the thinking of teachers (whether they are in state, private or international schools). As Fullan, Hill and Crevola would have it, "Schools need to get assessment for learning out of the basement, clean it up, and creatively recombine it with personalization and continuous professional learning" (2006: 18). DR Sadler challenged assessment for learning in 1989 by suggesting that teachers focus on "how judge-ments about the quality of student response (performances, pieces, or works) can be used to shape and improve the student's competence by short-circuiting the randomness and inefficiency of trial-and-error learning" (1989: 20). He further suggested that the essential element of formative assessment was "feedback", which would afford students opportunities to perceive his or her personal goal against a current level of performance. Feedback would then help the student close that gap. However, as West-Burnham and Coates assert, "Feedback related to formative assessment needs to avoid gratuitous praise, which can encourage the demonstration of ability rather than developing learning" (2005: 77).

In 2005 the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in the UK set out a number of guiding principles to inform the use of assessment for learning:

**Assessment for learning should be part of effective planning of teaching and learning**

*A teacher's planning should provide opportunities for both learner and teacher to obtain and use information about progress towards*

learning goals. Planning should include strategies to ensure that learners understand the goals they are pursuing and the criteria that will be applied in assessing their work.

#### **Assessment for learning should focus on how students learn**

The process of learning has to be in the minds of both learner and teacher when assessment is planned and when the evidence is interpreted.

#### **Assessment for learning should be recognised as central to classroom practice**

Tasks and questions prompt learners to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills. What learners say and do is then observed and interpreted, and judgements are made about how learning can be improved.

#### **Assessment for learning should be regarded as a key professional skill for teachers**

Teachers require the professional knowledge and skills to: plan for assessment; observe learning; analyse and interpret evidence of learning; give feedback to learners and support learners in self-assessment.

#### **Assessment for learning should be sensitive and constructive because any assessment has an emotional impact**

Teachers should be aware of the impact that comments, marks and grades can have on learners' confidence and enthusiasm and should be as constructive as possible in the feedback that they give. Comments that focus on the work rather than on the person are more constructive for both learning and motivation.

#### **Assessment for learning should take account of the importance of learner motivation**

Assessment that encourages learning fosters motivation by emphasising the progress and achievement rather than failure.

#### **Assessment for learning should promote commitment to learning goals and a shared understanding of the criteria by which they are assessed**

For effective learning to take place learners need to understand what it is they are trying to achieve—and want to achieve it.

#### **Assessment for learning develops learners' capacity for self-assessment so that they can become reflective and self-managing**

Independent learners have the ability to seek out and gain new skills, new knowledge and new understandings. They are able to engage in self-reflection and to identify the next steps in their learning.

#### **Assessment for learning should recognise the full range of achievements of all learners**

Assessment for learning should be used to enhance all learners' opportunities to learn in all areas of educational activity.

To what extent do you encourage students to work together to find an answer to a problem?

Is your school's marking policy supportive of formative assessment by concentrating on comments and targets rather than targets and grades?

How do you ask questions in class?

Is there an opportunity for peer evaluation in your lessons?

Are decision-making processes with reference to students fair?

How do you consider differentiation when giving feedback to students?

Do you use active revision strategies with your students?

How do you analyse student performance data and results to make critical use of them?

Do you work with other teachers in developing assessment for learning strategies?

Do you observe other teachers and give feedback, and are you regularly observed yourself?

Taken together, these questions represent a significant challenge to schools, especially in terms of:

- ▶ change management
- ▶ continuous professional development
- ▶ teamwork
- ▶ school culture.

A challenge, then, is for the teacher, and also the department, to change. If this is raised to the level of the school, then the challenge is even greater. Integration is a key issue in many secondary schools, because of the high commitment of most teachers towards their subject disciplines. Somehow, departments and staff must enhance one another's contribution to the achievement of the main purpose of the school. Getting

teachers to become "assessment literate", in the words of Fullan and Hargreaves (1998), requires collaborative working and much reflection on current pedagogical practice.

Eliciting students' values on some of these issues is essential because it provides a starting point for some schools. For others, students' values are an indication of just how far down the road they have travelled. Schools need to know whether their students have become participants or victims in the assessment process and how far the "locus of control" has shifted their way. Shifting the locus of control necessarily will not necessarily entail a loss of control by the teacher. Rather, it will develop shared responsibility. Black and William (1998a) identified three crucial elements in developing assessment for learning strategies:

1. Questioning
2. Marking and comments
3. Self-assessment and peer assessment.

### Questioning

Let us consider the concept of *wait time*. This is the period of silence that teachers allow after asking a question before, if no answer is forthcoming, asking another question or answering their own question. Astoundingly it often amounted to "less than 1 second" (Rowe 1986: 45). The shorter the wait time, the greater the reliance on factual questions. For those involved in developing new assessment strategies, this approach has been superseded by questions geared toward whole-class discussion or that students might use to explore a particular topic from different angles. Learning to learn is a fundamental element of this approach, particularly for those students who are experiencing difficulties. The comparative element in "spotting the right answer" gives way to developing levels of understanding.

The advantage to this approach is that it allows teachers an opportunity to explore the degree and richness of their students' understanding—not just whether they know facts.

### Marking and comments

Not all comments are helpful. As Black and associates observe, "comments become useful feedback only if students use them to guide further work" (2004: 13). It follows that teachers need to become more adept in their use of comments and more sophisticated in the ways in which they follow up such comments.

### Strategies

Try the following suggestions from the UK's Quality Improvement Agency (QIA 2008):

- ▶ Respond to the content and the message in the writing first. Do not focus only on surface errors such as spelling or punctuation.
- ▶ Do not move straight to the errors. Praise first.
- ▶ If the writing is weak then select one or two particular areas to draw attention to. Do not cover the work in red ink.
- ▶ Be specific. Indicate what action the learner should take in relation to weaknesses that have been marked.
- ▶ Encourage the learner to make corrections. Do not simply write in the correct answers, spellings, etc.
- ▶ Link comments to the learners' personal targets on an individual learning plan (ILP).

When giving verbal feedback remember to:

- ▶ Stress the positive. Always give specific feedback on what a learner has done well.
- ▶ Be clear about exactly what needs to improve next and how.
- ▶ Seek learners' views and value their contribution. This will help them to get better at assessing their own work, which is vital to them becoming independent learners.
- ▶ Invite the learner to comment on what you do as well.
- ▶ Feedback is not a one-way process.
- ▶ Frame questions carefully. Use open questions and resist asking more than one question at a time.
- ▶ Use "wait time" to encourage learners to consider carefully and expand on what they have said.
- ▶ Avoid generalizations. Instead focus on specific areas for development that you can discuss with the learner.
- ▶ Focus on things that each learner can change and avoid overloading them with too much feedback at once.
- ▶ Be sensitive if you have to give feedback to one person in a group.
- ▶ Look for ways forward together.
- ▶ Agree what you will both do as a result. This could include agreeing new targets or planning learning opportunities.
- ▶ Adapt your approach to suit one-to-one or group situations.

### Self-assessment and peer assessment

The research on self- and peer-assessment points to three significant advantages for both the teacher and the learner:

- ▶ The student's language is used.
- ▶ The student has the opportunity to play the role of the teacher.
- ▶ The student is often more willing to pursue an explanation of the topic with other students than is often the case with the teacher (partially because the student feels less intimidated by his or her peers than by the teacher).

There is a growing body of evidence that delineates assessment as a key element in the workings of "effective" departments in schools. One study by Alma Harris, Ian Jamieson and Jen Russ observed:

*Efforts were made to try and give the students, particularly the older ones, a stake in the assessment. They were often invited to mark each other's and their own work and discuss their marks with the teacher in order to try and understand the strengths and weaknesses of their own efforts . . . the assessment system was used as the vehicle for frequent feedback to the students, feedback that tended to be more criterion than norm referenced and these assessment-linked activities tended to provide the students with a clear sense of progression, which assisted motivation. In particular, it allowed them to highlight some of their own weaknesses on which they could concentrate.*

(1997: 155)

There is a clear correlation between student engagement with school and student empowerment. The extent to which students play a part in the life of the school, participate in the planning process and are listened to significantly affects their identification with the school and their education.

### Strategy

A couple of examples to try out in the area of peer assessment are worth considering:

**Form a question:** Ask learners to form questions based on the session in order to assess one another's learning.

**Minute paper:** Three or four minutes before the end of the session (or stage in the session), ask learners to write a short, focused response to a carefully worded prompt. For example, "What was the most important thing you learned about X? What new aspect of Y did you learn today? What was the most surprising thing you learned today? What points remain least clear to you?"

### Formative assessment

Formative assessment strategies go a long way to reinforcing a sense of identification. Consulting students' attitudes and sampling their opinion—for example with a student questionnaire—is a powerful way to kick-start a process or to determine how successful the department/school has been in delivering new strategies. Implicit in such an activity will be questions designed to flesh out opinions on teacher fairness, how interesting work is, whether teachers help students understand their work, how they can help make work better, the extent to which the school encourages independent thinking (an important element of the IB learner profile) and how much confidence students have in themselves and teachers' willingness to listen to them. In phrasing the questions, differences between ages of the children and the nature of the school must be taken into account. Harris, Jamieson and Russ's study of effective departments reinforces the importance of engaging meaningfully with students:

*We found that there were several aspects of whole-school policy that our departments were actually building upon. The first was a stress on the importance of the students that clearly went beyond the usual professional rhetoric. The schools in our study were characterised by systematic developments aimed at providing a caring environment for students, and every effort was made to involve them fully in the life of the school.*

(1997: 149)

At an individual classroom level this was translated into:

- ▶ student involvement in the learning process
- ▶ cooperative learning among students
- ▶ engaging students in reviewing the learning process
- ▶ ensuring that the assessment process was fundamental to building motivation and confidence
- ▶ using data as a tool for empowering teaching and learning.

### Strategies to support assessment for learning

- ▶ Clear identification of learning outcomes in terms of what is learned and how it is learned.
- ▶ Negotiation of performance levels that are personal and meaningful to the learner.
- ▶ Explicit criteria for the organisation and presentation of work.
- ▶ Strategies to support self-assessment as the first stage of the assessment for learning process.
- ▶ Peer assessment to consolidate self-assessment.

- ▶ Teachers using a range of sophisticated questioning techniques in the classroom to encourage review, deepen understanding and build confidence.
- ▶ Marking that is based on formative comments, questioning and explanation of grading with explicit guidance on improvement.
- ▶ Summative testing being used as the basis for diagnosis and formative strategies.
- ▶ Teachers developing a rich and sophisticated vocabulary to explain, justify and demonstrate their judgements.
- ▶ Review of assessment is central to monitoring developments and personal learning plans.

(West-Burnham, Coates 2006: 71)

## CASE STUDY

### Using photographs as an assessment for learning tool

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In my Year 7 class at the beginning of a unit on the "Restless Earth" I pin up 12 photographs showing volcano or earthquake impacts and aftermaths. The task is simple; students visit each photograph and discuss whether it shows a volcano or an earthquake. The important thing is not their actual answer but the reason they give for their choice. The teacher's role during this period of discussion and debate is not to give out answers. I listen, push students to really think about what they can see and encourage development of the reasons they record on worksheets.

Next, we use the interactive whiteboard to discuss the photos as a whole class. I emphasize to students that less important than making the correct identification is the ability to justify their ideas. This is where as a teacher you can also introduce some of the amazing things students will be learning in the unit, whetting their appetite for future learning! To finish up, I ask the students to write down two things they learned that they didn't already know and to think of two questions they would like to investigate during the unit.

I use this strategy at the beginning of a unit to establish what pupils already know and to identify any misconceptions to help guide planning. It also gives students a chance to discuss ideas in small groups without the risk of being "wrong" and shows them they probably know more than they think they do.

## The learning organization

This is about more than just assessment. The core of good teaching rests in assessment, which has implications for pedagogy, professional learning, theories of learning, and leadership and management. This is best illustrated by Figure 8.1.

Assessment for learning

Professional learning community

Pedagogical practice

Figure 8.1: Venn diagram (Fullan 2001; adapted from Louis, Kruse 1995, and Newman, Wehlage 1995)

In this model, teachers become "assessment literate". They engage in collaborative activity to create a professional learning community, which in turn informs classroom pedagogy. Fullan, Hill and Crevola have modified "professional learning community" into "professional learning" (2006: 21), believing that every teacher needs to engage in daily ongoing learning.

Assessment for learning is not a "bolt-on" technique; it requires a sea change in the way in which teachers operate in the classroom so that:

- ▶ the locus of control is shared between the teacher and the learner.
- ▶ the student becomes an active learner.
- ▶ the student becomes an independent learner.
- ▶ greater emphasis is placed on what Shulman (1986) calls "pedagogical content knowledge". This is less about subject knowledge and more about "the teacher's capacity to explore and reinterpret the subject matter is important for effective pedagogy" (Black, William 2003: 415). Some commentators have called this "focused teaching" (Fullan, Hill, Crevola 2006: 33), in which specific teaching strategies and methods are linked to learning objectives, standards and targets.

Research by educationalists such as Black and William suggests that minute-to-minute and day-to-day assessment improves student learning, but it is unclear about the extent to which teachers are developing these

practices in their own classrooms and about the level of support provided to them in order to do this. Dylan William and his colleagues from the Learning and Teaching Research Center at the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey, have worked with many groups of teachers in the USA to discover the best ways of implementing assessment for learning. As a result, they have identified five elements that increase the successful implementation of assessment for learning (AFL) (William 2006):

1. **Gradualism**—action plans relating to AFL should specify a small number of changes—perhaps two or three—that teachers will make in their teaching.
2. **Flexibility** around the various techniques that can be used in AFL.
3. **Choice** about which aspect or techniques in AFL are available.
4. **Accountability** between individual teachers and their colleagues at team meetings rather than between management and teachers.
5. **Support** provided by other colleagues, often through peer observation but outside any management performance observation.

### **A skills approach to the curriculum**

The IB, in developing its Primary and Middle Years Programmes, recognized that it is not always helpful, from a learner's point of view, to compartmentalize subjects. Correspondingly, making connections between subjects through the use of themes and key skills or competencies provides greater insights into the subject matter being taught. In particular, the IB publication *Towards a continuum of international education* describes the programmes' approaches to teaching and learning.

*The central purpose of teaching and learning is to help students develop and extend the concepts they use to understand the world, solve problems and communicate . . . A new concept is developed when meaningful connections are made between bodies of knowledge and other existing concepts, and the making of those connections leads to a deeper understanding of the world and an improved ability to solve problems . . . The challenge of excellent teaching is to help students achieve genuine and sophisticated understanding that helps them function effectively and independently in an increasingly complex world.*

(IBO 2008: 13)

This approach has been increasingly adopted through a range of learning models for students aged 11 years and upwards. One notable example is the UK Royal Society of Arts' "Opening Minds" framework. Increasingly, knowledge has a provisional status and the internet is providing a hugely increasing and ever-changing body of knowledge. Thus teachers need to promote skills in finding, analysing and evaluating information so that learners can construct their own knowledge. Moreover, Charles Handy (1998) has pointed out the need to develop interpersonal and social skills and to become emotionally intelligent, in order to cope with changes to the workplace and the emergence of "portfolio" people.

### **The leadership dimension**

Little of this will come to fruition unless there is a clear understanding of the role of leadership and management. There is a multitude of books and articles on this topic, but if any of the above are to be implemented then most of the following observations will need to be present in the model that underpins the leadership of the school:

- ▶ understanding change, and leading and managing it
- ▶ building relationships, and motivating and managing people
- ▶ knowledge creation and sharing
- ▶ coherence-making through designing and aligning systems
- ▶ capacity building in the organization.

Much of this chapter has focused on the implications for students and teachers of new assessment strategies and how they will transform classroom practice and students' roles in the school. Indeed, by concentrating on the student, most of the above dimensions will be, of necessity, activated. Certainly, Senge holds this as a truism:

*I have come to believe that the real hope for deep and enduring processes of evolution in school lies with students. They have a deep passion for making schools work. They are connected to the future in the ways no adult is.*

(2012: 69)

This is echoed by Papert (1996), who suggests that child power is the most powerful change force of all, and by Hartle and Hobby:

*The growing importance of knowledge puts a new premium on learning and suggests a reevaluation of the respective roles of*



teacher and learner. The changes . . . challenge our received views of the curriculum, assessment and the role of teachers. (2003: 382)

Their thinking is reflected in Figure 8.2.

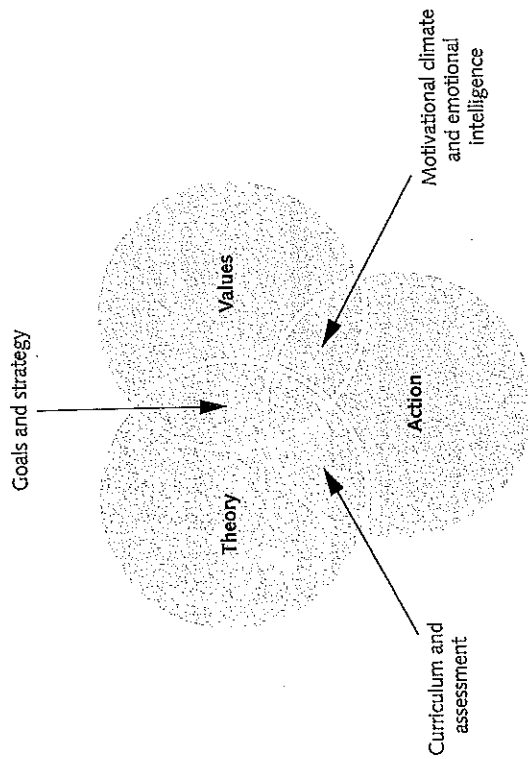


Figure 8.2: Hartle and Hobby's Venn diagram

The most fitting comment about the development of schools as learning communities and how assessment for learning is changing the role of teachers and learners comes from Senge and colleagues, who suggest that a learning school is "not so much a distinct and discrete place (for it may not stay in one building or facility) as a living system for learning . . . dedicated to the idea that all those involved with it, individually and together, will be continually enhancing and expanding their awareness and capabilities" (2012: 7). A learning school puts the students at the centre and connects up students, teachers, leaders, schools and communities.

## CHAPTER 9

# Leading the learning organization

If there is an all-pervasive theme to this book it must be the challenge of exponential change. Managing exponential change is crucial to the success of all educational institutions. In *The Learning Organisation* (1987), Garratt argues that for an organization to survive and develop, the rate of learning within it must be equal to, or greater than, the rate of change in the external environment. To achieve this it is therefore necessary for a school to become a learning organization. This argument was already supported by Peters and Waterman (1982), who assert that such organizations have developed a set of strategies that encourage experiments in change and embrace a commitment to all things new.

Charles Handy (1998) provides two definitions of a learning organization: an organization that learns and an organization that encourages learning in its people. Michael Fullan is a passionate champion of the concept of professional learning committees, which enable both teachers and schools to learn from one another. More recently, in the *McKinsey Quarterly*, Bryan and Joyce suggest that:

*For the better part of two decades, companies have invested heavily in knowledge management—with limited results because real value comes less from managing knowledge than from creating and exchanging it. To promote the exchange of knowledge, companies must remove the structural barriers to the interactions of professionals and managers as they solve problems. (2007: 28)*

This reinforces the tenets of Fullan's leadership model in *Leading in a Culture of Change* (2001a):

1. Moral purpose
2. Understanding change
3. Building relationships
4. Knowledge creation and sharing
5. Coherence making