

Q+A with assessment for learning expert, Associate Professor Mary Hill

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What is assessment for learning and why is it important?

Assessment for learning (AfL), in the words of the International Assessment Seminar (2009) “is part of the everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning” (p.2). And from the Assessment Reform Group (ARG) (2002) in the UK, “assessment for learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there” (ARG, 2002a, 2-3). Various other definitions exist but essentially, AfL as it is often called, is the process of using assessment information of many kinds to assist students to learn and teachers to teach so that students learn.

Assessment for learning is important because it leads students to become self-assessing and self-regulating, and consequently, life-long learners. In everyday terms, we often think of assessment as testing. But in teaching we discriminate between testing (assessment of learning) and the formative use of assessment for learning because measuring something does not always, or even often, lead to improving something. As people say, weighing the pig does not make it heavier!

What do you mean by assessment capability and how is it different from assessment for learning?

The report *Directions for Assessment in New Zealand* (Absolum, Flockton, Hattie, Hipkins, & Reid, 2009) envisages an “assessment capable” system where students are empowered to become self-regulated learners. This vision is closely aligned with an assessment for learning culture. But to implement AfL and build and maintain an assessment capable system, both teachers and students need to be “assessment capable”.

Assessment capability is a new term, coined in New Zealand but related to assessment literacy (Popham, 2009, Stiggins, 2002). Assessment literacy describes what teachers and other education professionals know and do, including the implementation of a range of summative and formative assessment practices, but its usage does not always refer to student agency. In contrast, “assessment-capable” teachers have the curricular and pedagogical capability, and the motivation, to engender assessment capability in their students. The use of the term assessment-capable distinguishes the New Zealand stance from other assessment systems where the student’s own assessment capability may not be at the heart of the assessment process (Booth, Hill & Dixon, 2014).

Directions for Assessment in New Zealand set out the role of the assessment capable teacher as:

- taking the lead in all assessment that students cannot manage without support ... in ways that encourage students to feel deeply accountable for their own progress and support them to become motivated, effective, self-regulating learners
- being knowledgeable about the curriculum and teaching
- having well developed assessment capabilities and the motivation to use these to forge learning partnerships with their students
- knowing how to gather the assessment information that other stakeholders require, and how to pass it on in ways that are consistent with, and supportive of, student learning
- having awareness of the effects of assessment on learners
- knowing exactly how an assessment should assist students to learn, and how to check whether it has done so
- establishing a classroom climate where mistakes are seen as opportunities, and where shared conversations about the nature of learning are commonplace. (Absolum et al., 2009, p. 24)

Assessment capable teachers (and students) know about, and use, assessment for learning in their daily classroom practice.

Can you explain what kinds of beliefs, attitudes and actions you would expect from an “assessment-capable” teacher?

This is a really important question and one that has been addressed in two published articles (Booth, Hill & Dixon, 2014; Booth, Dixon & Hill, 2016). In these articles we have drawn on the work of Sadler (1989) and fleshed out the three key conditions he states are necessary for students to acquire a self-monitoring approach to learning from the feedback they receive. They are briefly explained here but for more information, see Booth, Hill & Dixon (2014) and Booth, Dixon & Hill (2016).

Firstly, an assessment capable teacher helps students to understand what constitutes quality with respect to whatever it is they are learning to do. To do this, teachers must be willing and able to share their understanding of the requisite standard/quality of what they expect students to achieve and what this looks like in practice. “Only when this knowledge becomes transparent and is shared with learners can they learn to make their own judgements about the quality of their work. If teachers keep the knowledge of what constitutes the standard, learners’ dependence on teachers is maintained. The ability and willingness of teachers to share their expert knowledge, and to construct learning environments where learners can gain and make use of these skills, is crucial” (Booth, Hill & Dixon, 2014, p. 141).

Secondly, assessment capable teachers help students to develop metacognitive skills to evaluate their own work. Because successful students have agency and take responsibility for their own learning, it is imperative that teachers build evaluative capability in their students. Metacognition is the process of actively monitoring and regulating thinking while learning, essential to the processes of planning, problem solving and evaluating. When engaged in learning, students need to use these thinking strategies to create internal feedback and monitor their learning against the standards/quality shared (condition 1). Both self-appraisal, where students continually review and evaluate their thinking and progress, and self-management that keeps the process of monitoring and regulating task behaviour are required (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Thus, students need to develop both the ability to be assessment capable and the motivation/perseverance to sustain this way of being. Therefore, assessment capable teachers explicitly teach and support metacognitive approaches to learning.

Thirdly, assessment capable teachers assist their students to learn strategies to modify and improve their work. Building on the first two conditions, assessment capable teachers guide their students to improve. Feedback from teachers, peers and other sources is vital in this process, as is an ability to critically appraise what quality looks like in relation to what students are learning. This requires specific teaching. Assessment capable teachers know how to teach these skills through the use of exemplars, evaluative conversations, peer and self-assessments and other evaluative activities. Thus in summary, assessment capable teachers understand and engender assessment capability in their students deliberately, as a way of being not just by applying a set of strategies. In AfL ‘speak’, this is about implementing the spirit rather than the letter (Marshall & Drummond, 2006).

Are there any beliefs, attitudes and actions which hinder the development of assessment capability in teachers?

This is a really good question. Underlying assessment capability is a state of mind and a way of thinking about how people learn. In order to be an assessment capable teacher and use assessment for learning, teachers have to believe that their students can, with guidance and support, become self-directed, self-monitoring learners. So, the flipside of hindering the development of assessment capability is enhancing it through holding beliefs about the agency of your students. If you don’t believe your students are capable of self-regulation, self-assessment or managing their own learning, your assessment practices will reflect this and be mainly teacher centred where the students have a passive role.

If a teacher wanted to implement assessment for learning in their classroom practice, how would you suggest they go about doing this? What steps would they need to take?

This is not something that can be answered briefly, precisely because there is no recipe to implementing assessment for learning. Here I have listed briefly some essential actions needed to bring about assessment for learning in classrooms.

1. Building relationships and creating a safe yet challenging classroom culture
2. Knowing what you expect students to achieve before teaching and learning begins
3. Showing students what success looks like
4. Sharing evidence of learning
5. Involving students in the process of assessment
6. Using evidence from assessment to guide teaching
7. Communicating about progress
8. Continuing to improve

At first glance this list might seem straight forward, what we already do, but being an assessment capable teacher is a sophisticated and practised way of being in the classroom. Studies have shown that assessment capable teachers may look and sound different from each other, in action. Several books for teachers show teachers how they can become assessment capable teachers. In the New Zealand context, the following are highly recommended:

Davies, A., & Hill, M. (2009). *Making Classroom Assessment Work*. Wellington: NZCER Press.

Absolum, M. (2006). *Clarity in the Classroom*. Auckland: Hodder Education.

There are also some books published internationally that provide practical advice for implementing an assessment for learning approach to teaching, such as

Williams, D. & Leahy, S. (2015). *Embedding Formative Assessment: practical techniques for K-12 classrooms*. Florida: Learning Sciences International.

What characteristics does effective and formative feedback to students have?

Many studies, books and articles have focused on this question. There are feedback models and continua available that describe different kinds of feedback and its effectiveness. I suggest reading up on this topic and learning more. But here I will simply say here that there are three really important feedback principles to stick to:

1. Give feedback generously, all the time, in lots of different ways.

As teachers we often feel we have done this but from students' we often hear that they don't have enough, of the right kind, at the right times. In a course I teach at tertiary level I try to build in structured opportunities for students to get feedback on what they are trying to achieve from at least three sources at every step of the learning process. For example, feedback from their peers, feedback from looking at previous students' work samples/exemplars, feedback from the teacher, feedback from evaluating their peers' attempts, and so on.

2. Provide plenty of descriptive feedback that shows where the student is now and where to next.

Descriptive feedback is not evaluative: a tick, a score, a mark or grade, or even a highlighted line on a rubric. Descriptive feedback shows the student where they went wrong, why and how they might improve next time.

3. Ensure there are plenty of opportunities for students to use the feedback to improve what they are learning to do.

So often we give feedback and then move on to something new. How can students improve without the opportunity to do things again, try them in new contexts, in new ways? In tertiary this can mean having assignments that build one on the next so that the feedback from previous assignments can inform what is expected in the next.

What are your views on the usefulness of marks and grades?

Marks and grades are important for some purposes. For example, in later secondary school and at tertiary level students are there to gain qualifications. Qualifications rest on the quality of the students' performances, how well they are able to reach a standard or expected achievement level. Marks and grades are effective and efficient ways of indicating how close the attempt has come to that expected standard. Of course they are not enough to tell the student how to improve. For that the students also need descriptive feedback as outlined above. But in society we do need indications of the quality of performances, so marks and grades are like other rating systems such as scores for competing at the Olympic games or the star ratings film critics use. Marks and grades are useful to know how well you are going in terms of the quality of your work **for a particular purpose**.

However, I don't believe that marks and grades are very useful at all in primary schools. We don't award qualifications before Year 11 in the New Zealand schooling system and in my experience, marking, grading and ranking students for other purposes is often counterproductive. More useful are criteria and rubrics that describe what we are trying to achieve. The best of these act as aids to self-assessment and achievement without the need for any marks or grades!!

How important is students' self-assessment, and is this something that needs to be taught?

What skills do students need and how do teachers foster these?

As I talked about earlier, the aim of assessment for learning is to build self-managing individuals who use self-assessment all the time to monitor and shape their learning and success. As any athlete, performer or golfer knows, it's all about knowing how you are doing in what you are working to learn or achieve and modifying what you do to get better. For me, it's not so much skills that students need, and teachers need to foster. It's more about dispositions such as perseverance, optimism, resilience and confidence. It's more about interest and passion and motivation. If we as teachers can foster these dispositions, students will seek

out and practice the skills they need along the way. The skills will be different, for different achievements and in different contexts, but the dispositions are the same. Teachers need to foster these through providing safe environments in which to take risks, showing their students that they can be successful, and building trust in teaching and learning relationships.

From your research, what are they key things that you believe teachers need to know about assessment for learning?

From my research about people learning to be teachers, the key things are, again, as much about teacher beliefs and attitudes as about knowing things. For example, from our TLRI project we discovered that the majority of people entering teacher education were very anxious about assessment, they saw it as a negative part of education and mainly thought about it as tests and examinations. Now if that's how people think about assessment, it's very challenging to learn to use assessment for learning because these views and negative emotions strongly influence whatever people read, learn or try to do. When they see the word assessment, instead of thinking about working collaboratively, feedback, exemplars and trust, they instantly think test conditions, working as an individual and marks.

So first and foremost, the teacher educator's role is to use assessment for learning to build a different conception of assessment with preservice teachers so they can come to understand what assessment for learning might be and feel like. Learning and assessment, in all its forms including assessment for learning is a complex and time-consuming journey. It begins in teacher preparation but it continues throughout a teaching career. It will be different for everyone, depending on their prior knowledge beliefs and dispositions. Most of all it takes teacher educators (of all sorts) with deep understanding about assessment to bring about assessment for learning as a culture in the education system.

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