

IAEA 2010, Thailand

Making a change to teachers' readiness of using Assessment for Learning for classroom teaching

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Abstract

Black and Wiliam (1998) and the Assessment Reform Group (1999) point out that if teachers are to raise the quality of students' learning, they should take Assessment for Learning (AfL) as an essential component of classroom work. However, standards can be raised only if teachers are willing and are able to tackle AfL. Exploration into teachers' readiness for the new assessment concept indicated that teachers were generally unprepared for AfL. This paper presents an attempt to make a change to the assessment practices in the classroom. The investigation, supported by Quality Education Fund, was conducted in Hong Kong where teaching and learning is deeply influenced by the examination culture (Berry, 2010a in press). This one-year study involved twenty-seven teachers from eight primary schools in Hong Kong. After first being introduced to AfL concepts through a number of seminars and workshops, the teachers tried out some AfL ideas of their choice in their classroom teaching. In their regular teacher community meetings, the teachers shared their experiences and discussed how the AfL practices could be improved. Using lesson observation, document analysis, interviewing and teacher self reflections as the main research instruments, it was found that teachers were more aware of the usefulness of AfL and were more able to use AfL for classroom teaching. There were signs of changes in their classroom assessment practices. Cases will be selected to illustrate the kinds of changes identified in individual teachers.

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Introduction

For centuries, assessment was largely summative serving various kinds of selection purposes such as making decisions on educational opportunities, career advancements and resource allocations. Standardised paper-and-pencil tests were often used as the mode of assessment as the quantitative data generated presented an comparison of student performance. Towards the end of the twentieth century, there were some prevailing perceptions about learning that were commonly and internationally labelled as “learning-to-learn”, “lifelong learning” and “whole person development”. The assessment trends, as a response to the prevailing learning concepts, moved from an emphasis on prediction and control to an emphasis on meaning and understanding (Biggs & Watkins, 2001; Dwyer, 1998; Torrance & Pryor, 1998). This shift supported the notion of assessment for learning (AfL). In brief terms, AfL entails using assessment to understand where the students are in their learning progression, to identify their learning needs and after that, provide direction to help students move forward (Berry, 2008). Teaching methodologies would be de-centered from the teacher authority approach to one which stresses learner-centredness. Teachers were advised to link assessment with teaching and learning and were encouraged to use different kinds of assessment strategies and tasks to assess a wide spectrum of learning outcomes. These assessment strategies would include asking students to reflect on their own and their peers' learning through self and peer assessment.

To improve student achievement across the curriculum, a growing body of research suggests that improving teacher quality and their capacity to use assessment as central to learning may be the most effective way to attain this goal. Black and Wiliam (1998) and the Assessment Reform Group (1999) point out that if teachers are to raise student standards, they should take Assessment for Learning (AfL) as an essential component of classroom work. Black and Wiliam (1998) found that improvement in the quality of formative assessment resulted in effect sizes of the order of 0.4 to 0.7

standard deviations (equivalent to doubling the rate of learning). A more recent review of the literature on the effects of feedback and formative assessment in post-secondary education (Nyquist, 2003) found effects of similar magnitude, and, perhaps more significantly, showed that the larger effect sizes were associated with stronger implementation of the principles of assessment for learning. Worldwide, although there were signs of improvement in using assessment for learning purposes in the classroom, AfL still lacked fundamental developments. Exploration into teachers' readiness for changing conceptions of formative assessment has indicated that teachers were unprepared for the change. In many educational contexts, teachers did not have a clear understanding of the concepts of assessment for learning and their assessment practices in the classroom did not meet the standards required by the assessment reform (Berry, 2010b in press). For example, in Hong Kong, some teachers were found to be reluctant in adopting the new approaches and some were rather negative towards the new assessment policies (Carless, 2005; Kennedy et al 2008). This paper presents an investigation into whether teachers could make a change to their assessment practices – a change to use assessment for learning purposes.

Teacher professional development to bring about a change

Teachers are key to reform success (Gardner et al., 2010 in press). To prepare teachers to meet new educational demands, many nations organized different kinds of professional development. Some organized extensive professional development programmes that draw on expertise beyond the school. Some mandated the number of formal professional development hours that teachers must commit each year and some provided teachers with individual optional professional development seminars and workshops. However, in general, the results were not as desirable as anticipated. For example, The report, *Tomorrow's Schools of Education* (1995, p.6f), informed that 20 percent of all American doctoral degrees and 25 percent of all master's degrees were acquired in teacher-training institutions yet did not produce any significant improvement in school quality. Nieto (2009) reports that, too often, teachers find that their professional development is both inadequate and irrelevant.

Wei et al. (2009) make some suggestions on how nations should invest in teachers, as

follows:

- Time for professional learning and collaboration built into teachers' work hours.
- Ongoing professional development activities that are embedded in teachers' contexts and focused on the content to be taught.
- Extensive opportunities for both formal and informal in-service development.
- Supportive induction programs for new teachers.
- School governance structures that involve teachers in decisions about curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development.

Professional development that treats improving classroom practice as a collaborative and negotiated activity rather than a 'top-down' initiative is more helpful. Through a collegiate environment, teachers will feel more supported when they try out ideas that are new to them. Teachers enjoy school-based training that is embedded in teachers' contexts. Semadeni (2010) reports a professional development model which teachers enjoyed. The model, called Fusion, was developed at Osmond Elementary, a school in Lincoln County School District #2 with 320 students and 15 classroom teachers. In this model, teachers collaborated to study, experiment, and coached one another in research-based strategies. School climate surveys showed that Osmond teachers had higher morale and were more willing to work together to solve difficult problems after they adopted this method of teacher learning.

The study reported in this paper was a collegiate school-based training which takes *content* and *process* as two focuses of professional training, presented in the following graph representation (Figure 1).

Assessment for Learning (AfL) Teacher Professional Development Roadmap

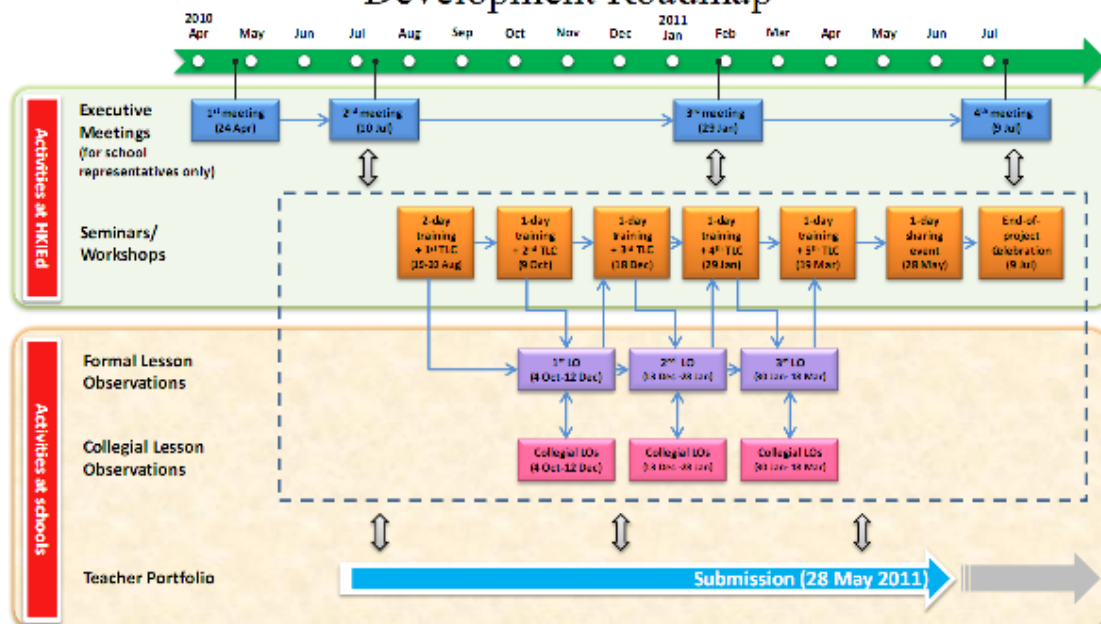


Fig 1. Assessment for Learning (AfL) Teacher Professional Development Roadmap

On the content side, teachers were provided with a 2 two-day training programme at the beginning of the new academic year. In addition, teachers attended a series of one-day workshops / seminars, spread over the year, through which the teachers were introduced to the key concepts of AfL and implementation techniques. An AfL framework with ten guiding principles (Berry 2008, p.14-18) provided the basic structure of the content side of the professional development. as follows:

1. Aligning assessment to teaching and learning
2. Exploring the use of multidimensional assessment methods
3. Selecting those assessment methods which are susceptible to learning
4. Considering drawing an joint efforts among colleagues
5. Assessing students continuously throughout the learning processes
6. Allowing students to take part in the assessment process
7. Using assessment to uncover students' learning
8. Making marking criteria accessible for students
9. Providing feedback to facilitate students' learning
10. Analyzing and reporting students' results

These guiding principles entail that assessment should be seen as an interconnected part of teaching and learning and should be consistent with the objectives of the course and what is taught and learnt. Assessment can vary in form, depth or breadth to reflect different facets of learning. Teachers can select different kinds of assessment strategies to uncover students' learning and use them to assess students formatively throughout the course. The information obtained can be used to help students improve their learning. To support learning, feedback needs to be constructive and timely and marking criteria have to be made accessible to students so that students will understand what is expected of them. Marking criteria could also be used as a basis for giving feedback and communicating results to different parties. The ten AfL principles should not be viewed as separate entities. They should be seen as complimentary to each other in supporting learning. The ten AfL principles will be referred to in presenting the data analysis.

On the process side, teachers were asked to develop an "AfL action plan" for the changes they wished to effect in their classrooms for the following school year. After first being introduced to AfL, the teachers developed an action to try out AfL ideas of their choice in their classroom teaching. In the same academic year, the teachers continued to meet for one day every six to seven weeks (Teacher Learning Community (TLC) meetings), to share their experiences and to develop further their understanding of AfL. Teachers from different schools met and shared their concerns and insights during the implementation period. During this time, the teachers were also observed teaching by project staff and their fellow teachers, in order to help them reflect on the changes they were making to their practice at the school-based TLC meetings. Again, there was feedback from their peers and the researchers. All teachers involved in the project enjoyed twelve months of AfL professional training.

The study

This paper presents an investigation into the changes teachers made in their assessment practices. The one-year investigation was conducted in Hong Kong where teaching and learning is deeply influenced by the examination culture. Data was collected from a professional development focus group, including teacher interviews,

teacher reflections at teaching learning community meetings (TLC) and school-based TLC meetings after peer lesson observations and document analysis. The study sample consisted of 27 teachers from eight primary schools in Hong Kong. Three cases have been chosen to illustrate their changes.

Case One – Teacher A

In one of the TLC meetings, Teacher A (T18E) reported her attempts to align assessment with teaching and learning. In the first peer observation lesson, she reflected that she set far too many learning objectives in one lesson and it was very hard to align assessment with them. About 5 months later, in the teacher interview, she said that the learning goals she set for students were more manageable. When she planned her lessons, she said that she would always check to see if the assessment activities aligned with teaching and learning. Below is the lesson plan she used in the fourth peer lesson observation.

English Lesson Plan

Teachers: Teacher A (T18E)
 Class: XX
 Date: XX
 Time: 8:40-9:20 (40 minutes)
 Learning pre-requisites:
 ● Simple past tense
 Learning Objectives:
 After this lesson, students will be able to:
 1. Use verbs in simple past tense to talk about what they did in the past.
 2. Sequence events in chronological order.
 Theme/Subject matter: Module: Relationships – Unit 8 What Was It Like Then?
 Cooperative skill: group work
 AFL: Mainly focus on
 Principle 1: Aligning assessment to teaching and learning.
 Principle 6: Allowing student’s participation in assessment process.

| Stage | Time (mins) | Learning Activities | Aids | Assessment / Remarks |
|---------------|-------------|--|---|---------------------------------|
| A. Motivation | | | | |
| | 10 | 1. Questioning ● T: What did you learn yesterday? ● S: past tense. ● T: I taught you past tense. When should we use past tense? 2. Play <i>Error Correction Game</i> ● Check the worksheet and revise the concept and the use of past tense. ● Highlight the form of irregular and regular verbs. 3. Show the photos of students and ask | <i>Error Correction Game</i> Worksheet PowerPoint | Check their previous knowledge. |

| | | | | |
|--------------------------|----|--|----------------------|---|
| | | students to talk about what they did in the past by using the simple past tense. | | |
| B. Development | | | | |
| Whole-class learning | 25 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Read the textbook p.41. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highlight the use of tense. Highlight how the events are sequenced in chronological order. (e.g. years: number is arranged from small to big; months: from January to December; seasons: from spring to winter) Task: Help Miss Lee to create her photo album <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Show some examples and highlight the successful criteria. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> use <i>past tense</i> start with the correct pronoun, "<i>She</i>" end with "year (the number from small to big)" Distribute the photos to students and ask them to finish the sentence by changing the correct form of verb and adding the appropriate year. Peer assessment: read and check the sentence with the group members. Student A checks the accuracy of each sentence. Ask students to sequence the photos in chronological order. Student A checks the accuracy of the order. Teacher checks the work and give the relevant feedback. | PowerPoint Photos | Check whether students can use simple past tense to talk about things that happened in the past. Check whether they can sequence the events in a correct order. |
| Group activity | | | | |
| C. Consolidation | | | | |
| Application (Assignment) | 5 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Conclusion Distribute a worksheet and ask students to think about five important events that happened in his / her life. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remind students to use past tense in writing sentences with appropriate pronoun and sequence the sentences in chronological order. | Worksheet | |

Case Two – Teacher B

Teacher B (P01T03M) was an experienced teacher who had taught in a primary school in Hong Kong for over 11 years. Teacher A gave an impression that she was quite receptive to change. At the very first TLC meeting (TLC, 24.8.09), she said, "I think assessment is essential in daily classroom." She reported some changes in her assessment practice:

- *Before I only focused on teaching, and viewed assignments as the only means of*

judging the success of teaching. Now, when I plan the lessons, I think about what assessment an activity can bring and what I expect students to learn.

- *In the past, I only used ticks to mark student work. Now, I give students comments to help them learn.*
- *I ask students to write learning journals. This is something I didn't do before. I ask them to write down the difficulties they encountered and what they have learnt in the lesson.*

Teacher B found that students became more active in their learning. She said that the students were more aware of the mistakes they made and were more eager to find help. Below is a lesson she explored integrating different kinds of assessment strategies into her teaching.

Case Three – Teacher C

At the last two TLC meetings and teacher interview, Teacher C (T27E) reported using different kinds of assessment strategies to support student learning. For example, she asked students to keep a learning portfolio so that they could reflect on and monitor their own learning. She got students to peer assess each other's written work. To facilitate peer assessment, she provided the students with a checklist and explained to them how judgments could be made. She reported using feedback to improve student learning. For marking students' written work, she tried a feedback strategy which was new to her. When she spotted some mistakes in her students' work, instead of giving them the correct answers, she underlined the mistakes and made them think why they were underlined and asked them what could be a better alternative for those underlined. She also reported that she would see if students had achieved the set learning targets. If not, she would do some remedial teaching.

The three cases showed that teachers could make a change to their assessment practices. In addition to the above three cases, all teachers involved in the project did show some signs of change in their assessment practices. On the whole, the teachers were more aware of the usefulness of AfL and were more able to use AfL for classroom teaching. There were signs of changes in their classroom assessment

practices and there was evidence to show that teachers used assessment for supporting learning.

Conclusion

The 20th century saw the rise of testing and the purpose of assessment was overwhelmingly summative. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, there was an international calling to use assessment for learning purposes. Many countries embarked on an education reform with a highly emphasised *Assessment for Learning* agenda. Research into the assessment practices in the classroom showed that there were many gaps between what the policies want and the assessment practice in the classroom. Many teachers were in fact very willing to match the requirements stipulated in the assessment reform however were not so ready to use assessment for learning. This study showed that with support, teachers could make a change to their assessment practice - making assessment serve teaching and learning.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Quality Education Fund for providing the resources for the investigation and project team members including Dr Eleanore Hargreaves, Dr Pamela Leung, Professor Gordon Stobart, Dr Yiu Chi Lai and Professor David Scott for providing professional training for the project teachers.

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