

Bridging the gap between teaching and learning

Amy: I taught my dog to whistle.
Betty: Let's hear it then.
Amy: He can't whistle.
Betty: I thought you said you
taught him to whistle!
Amy: I did. He just didn't learn it.



What has **most** impact on student learning? Inspirational presentations? Clear, staged demonstrations? Interesting, well planned group activities? Additional support?

None of these. Black and Wiliam, in an analysis of research in numerous countries, found **formative assessment** was the most significant factor in helping learners achieve.

In fact, *effective* formative assessment could improve achievement dramatically.

What is formative assessment?

Formative assessment is developmental assessment: activities that help students and teachers understand the student's current level of knowledge/skills and what they need to do next.

In-course opportunities to check learning are many: asking questions, monitoring group discussion, setting exercises or quizzes, student practicals, or homework, for example.

However, these are not in and of themselves effective in turning teaching into learning. Black and Wiliam emphasise the importance of:

1. Regular feedback

To gain from assessment, students need frequent constructive feedback with clear actions for improvement.

For a long time, adult educators were concerned about being 'critical' in case they discouraged learners. In fact, research by NIACE suggests that adults value feedback from tutors highly. In a small study at City Lit in 1213, this was echoed by our own students. One said 'My teacher tells me everything I do is 'good', but I want to know how to be better.'

An excellent technique for constructive feedback is 'medals and missions' – clear statements of what a learner has done well (medals) then specific actions for improvement (missions).

Medals and Missions feedback *Massage Course*

Medals

- Your routine is now at professional level.
- Very good client care – you regularly checked your pressure with the client.

Missions

- Now work on your towel management to ensure client modesty.

2. Well formed questioning with 'wait time'

To be effective, questions need to be well planned, and students given 'wait time' - a pause, or thinking time in pairs or groups - so everyone has a chance to answer. The best questions ask students to use their learning and to think. There is more about questioning in issue 1.

3. Peer and Self assessment

'It is very difficult for students to achieve a learning goal unless they understand that goal and can assess what they need to do to reach it.' (William, 2011)

Students need to 'own' their learning. To support this, teachers need to

- share the specific learning outcomes for a lesson with students.
- model and give examples of what students are aiming at

Self and peer assessment enable everyone to fully own their learning goals, and to support each other in meeting them.

Activities will vary from subject to subject, and with the nature of the course, but the following are some ideas:

3 things I have learned and one question.

Ask students to reflect on 3 things they learned (e.g. from the previous session), and one question they still have. They then share these with others in 2s or 3s. They either answer the question themselves or check with the teacher

Self assessment checklist. Midway through the course, give students a list of the learning outcomes covered in class so far. Ask them to grade themselves against how confident they feel with each one (e.g. **A** Confident, **B** OK with practice, **C** Need to go over it again.)

Students write a test. Get students to contribute one question each to a quiz/test. Then everyone does the quiz.

Peer feedback. This is very commonly used at City Lit e.g. in art and drama. To

make it really effective, remind students of the learning goal/s before asking them to feedback to each other. e.g. if the goal is to develop tone in an art class, remind students to focus on this.

If you were marking this Give students examples of work from a previous course, or a 'spoof' example. Get them to analyse the work against marking criteria and say what feedback they would give.

e-voting. Teacher asks a question and everyone votes using electronic voting systems. The results are displayed on the board in a bar chart or a list. The class discusses why one result is better than others.

Keep a blog. Encourage learners to record examples and reflections on their work in a blog available to all the class.

Recording formative assessment

At City Lit, we have to keep records of learner progress even for non accredited courses (RARPA). Any system should record learners' starting points, and include a regular brief update on progress against learning outcomes.

The records need to be individualised but do not need to be beautiful as long as they show each student's learning journey. It could include a piece of flipchart with post it notes from initial assessment, for example. Best of all, work out a way that records can be kept by students themselves.

Further reading

All references to Black and William from:
Black P. et al, (2003) *Assessment for Learning. Putting it into practice* Open University Press
William, D. (2011) *Embedded Formative Assessment*. Solution Tree Press

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