

ECAD6007 - Who am I teaching?

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Assignment title: A critical evaluation and the identification of next teaching and learning steps focusing on a case study of an individual learner or a group of learners, based on an observed critical incident.

Introduction

This essay will be a reflection and evaluation of an observed critical incident in a secondary school setting. Based on the consideration of relevant literature and reflection upon the critical incident, I will use this to inform my ongoing development as a teacher.

In the first section of this essay, I will consider the role and importance of critical reflection as a teacher, before moving onto a description of the critical incident I observed. As Tripp describes, a critical incident can be defined as a description of a routine or commonplace event that is “indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures” (Tripp, 2011: 25) and “rendered critical through analysis” (ibid). Based on my observations, I have produced a critical incident that is focused on assessment for learning (AfL). My literature review will focus on contextualising this critical incident in the area of AfL, synthesising key points in the literature. I will then go on to reflect upon the critical incident using Kolb’s (1984) reflective model, using this reflection and the context of the literature to inform the next teaching and learning steps in my personal and professional development as a teacher.

The role of critical reflection

As a teacher, the role of critical reflection is essential to professional development. Dewey (1993) defined reflection as an “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends [that] constitutes reflective thought” (Dewey, 1993: 16). This suggests that reflection enables our practice to be informed by theory, based on the careful analysis of any belief or practice. Reflection is not a one off experience, but instead an active and persistent mindset, or a “disposition to enquiry” (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012: 5) that should be

equipped by teachers in order to improve our own teaching practice, and improve student learning.

Farrell uses the metaphor of a compass to consider reflection for teachers: “reflection as a compass enables teachers to stop, look, and discover where they are at that moment and then decide where they want to go (professionally) in the future” (Farrell, 2012: 7). Reflection is therefore a tool used to inform teachers to make decisions about their future teaching, based on analysis of their previous or current experience and practice. The result of critical reflection could suggest that a certain current practice is working and should be continued, or may suggest that change is needed - either way, this will be due to the “analysis of concrete evidence” (ibid: 14) rather than “impulse, tradition, or the like” (ibid). Critical reflection therefore means that any changes to practise are backed up by evidence, creating an evidence based teaching practice.

As the new Curriculum for Wales is being introduced into schools across Wales, a mindset of critical reflection will be essential in order to understand what good teaching and learning will look like under these changes. Having a reflective and critical mindset will allow us to consider how effectively we are implementing the curriculum, and evaluate the impact of this curriculum and the Four Purposes on learners.

When considering critical reflection, there are a number of models of reflection that teachers can use. Kolb (1984) considers a holistic approach, looking at the whole learning cycle in four stages - concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Schon (1983) presents two ideas of reflection: “reflection in action” (Schon, 1983: 73) and “reflection on action” (ibid: 62). Reflection in action refers to the reaction and quick thinking of the teacher in practice, often adapting or changing aspects of the teaching as you go based on the reaction of the classroom. Reflection on action focuses on reflection after the event, considering how you may do things differently and gaining a new perspective on the event. Brookfield (1995) considers looking at reflection from various perspectives, rather than

just the self- this is a less prescriptive approach, and considers the reflections and feedback from the self, the students' eyes, our colleagues' and peers' experiences, and scholarly/theoretical literature. When reflecting on the critical incident, I will be using Kolb's model of reflection.

Observation context

In order to align with BERA guidelines (2018), all of my data will be anonymised as 'confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data is considered the norm for the conduct of research' (BERA, 2018: 21). The school will not be named, and any pupils or staff will not be identified in any way.

The observation took place in a mixed gender, English medium, comprehensive school, based in Swansea. The school has over 1,500 students between the ages of 11 and 18, with the sixth form containing approximately 350 students. In this school, approximately 12% of pupils are identified as having a 'special educational need, and 1.7% have a statement of special educational needs' (Estyn, 2018) which is below the Welsh average. In addition to this, approximately 25% of students are from an ethnic minority background, and 'just over 20% speak English as an additional language' (Estyn, 2018).

Throughout my time at the school, I was able to observe a number of Year 7 and Year 8 classes, focusing on shadowing one form group and their lessons throughout the day. This meant I was able to observe a number of lessons under various Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs), providing a wide range of experience and varied teaching and learning styles.

Critical incident

The critical incident I observed was in a Year 7 mathematics class; there were approximately 30 students in the classroom, and the class was immediately after their break.

The critical incident I observed was the varying forms of assessment and feedback the teacher used after a quick starter activity. This included self assessment, peer assessment and a form of blind assessment to provide immediate feedback to the teacher. This type of assessment for learning (AfL) allowed the students to be involved in the learning process, and gave the teacher an opportunity to see who may need additional support to improve their learning and understanding.

The starter activity was displayed on the board as the students entered the class - they had to answer 7 division sums, showing their workings out in their book. Once students had completed the starter activity, the teacher cold called on a student for the first answer. The teacher then asked the class as a whole to shout out 'yes' if they agree with the answer, or 'no' if they disagree, allowing the class to give instant peer feedback and assessment. The class agreed with the answer, and the students self assessed their own work with a red pen or pencil.

After cold calling on a different student for the next answer, the class then disagreed with this student's answer by shouting 'no'. The teacher then cold called on another student to give the correct answer, and asked them to come up to the board to explain how they worked out their answer. The teacher continued with this method to mark the starter activity; anytime that a student gave a wrong answer, the teacher would pick a different student to come up to the board to show how they worked out the correct answer. This links to Donaldson's (2015) four purposes - specifically the "enterprising, creative contributors" (Donaldson, 2015: 29) purpose, which entails students "give of their energy and skills so that other people will benefit" (ibid). By

getting the student to explain their own work and how they reached the correct answer, they are playing the role of a contributor who applies their skills to help others in the class benefit, who may not have got the correct answer initially, promoting collaboration and teamwork.

Once the class had marked all of the sums on the board, he asked students to give themselves a mark out of 7. He then instructed the class to put their heads down on the desk, and put their hands up if they got 7/7, 6/7 and so on. This gave the teacher immediate, blind feedback as to how each individual student was progressing with their understanding of division.

In addition to linking to the “enterprising, creative contributors” (Donaldson, 2015: 29) purpose, I believe that this starter activity can also be linked to the “ambitious, capable learners” (ibid) purpose, as students are “are questioning and enjoy solving problems” (ibid), and “can explain the ideas and concepts they are learning about” (ibid). Throughout the activity, the students had to first work independently to solve the problems, and were asked to show their workings to ensure they can explain the concept of division, and share their problem solving skills to the class when necessary.

Literature review

In order to contextualise the critical incident, I will investigate research around assessment for learning (AfL) or formative assessment, and questioning. For this literature review, the terms AfL and formative assessment will be used interchangeably. The majority of the literature identified emanates from the UK, between the dates 1995 - 2020. Black and Wiliam (1998; 2003; 2009) are the most prominent contributors to this body of knowledge, promoting AfL as a positive intervention to improve teaching and learning, using quantitative studies. Critiques of this approach come mainly from Bennett (2011) and centre on the problem with quantitative

evidence in this area, and the definitional problem of the wide ranging activities considered as AfL.

Ideas surrounding formative assessment and assessment for learning were popularised by Black and William (1998; 2003; 2009), who considered the positive impact of formative assessment in schools. They defined formative assessment in a classroom to be when “evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners and their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited” (Black and William, 2009: 9). AfL is therefore a feedback loop that causes thinking, and improves learning - both for the student, teacher and peers. It gives students an opportunity to test their knowledge in a usually low stakes environment, and provides opportunities to improve their achievement. In addition to this, it involves teachers assessing the learning that has or has not taken place, and adjusting their teaching and lessons accordingly. AfL techniques can also be seen as an empowering tool for students - by being given opportunities to test their knowledge and improve upon their learning, it means that they “are seen as active collaborators in the building of knowledge” (Padmanabha, 2021: 17), showing a constructivist theoretical background to the practice where students “acknowledge their role as collaborators in the learning process” (ibid).

William and Black describe the key principles of formative assessment tasks as follows: “Classroom questioning (or dialogue); Feedback through marking ; Peer and self-assessment; Formative use of summative tests” (Black et al., 2003: 69-70). When considering the critical incident described above, I observed a combination of effective questioning, peer and self assessment, and formative, low stakes quizzes. The teacher used a blind hands-up method of assessment to see what mark each student received - based on this feedback, the teacher was then able to consider if the topic needed revisiting, based on how well the class did, and was able to identify students who may have needed further help with the topic. In addition to this, the teacher asked students to come up to the board, to display how they worked out the correct

answer. This could be considered a form of ‘process-thinking questioning’, wherein the student explains their thought process behind the answer, using metacognitive skills. Rosenshine found that “the most effective teachers... ask students to explain the process they used to answer the question, to explain how the answer was found” (Renshine, 2012: 14). Within AfL strategies then, one must consider the way we are asking questions, and whether they are effective - this is only one example of effective questioning techniques that can be used when considering AfL.

William and Black saw a quantitative, empirical learning gain achieved by using AfL techniques, finding an effect size of between 0.4 and 0.7, which were “larger than most of those found for educational interventions” (Black and William, 1998: 141). Following this, and Black’s later work, AfL was popularised across the UK, with the Assessment for Learning Strategy (2008) being implemented, investing £150 million over three years in order to aid schools make ‘good progress’ with assessment for learning, focusing on Key Stage 2 and 3. Swaffield criticised this strategy, claiming that the report is “dominated by an alignment with ‘Assessing Pupils’ Progress’ and summative forms of assessment” (Swaffield, 2009: 13), rather than the true pedagogy of AfL and formative assessment. While AfL techniques appear to be effective for improving pupil progress, a risk does lie with techniques being misrepresented by top-down initiatives that have a focus on accountability and progress for the school or country’s sake, rather than the pupil as a unique, individual learner.

However, considering the Welsh context, the new Curriculum for Wales describes a key principle of assessment as “an ongoing process which is indistinguishable from learning and teaching” (Welsh Government, 2020), and that “learners are at the heart of assessment and should be supported to become active participants in the learning process” (ibid). While the new curriculum does not mention AfL directly, it is clear to see that the new curriculum appears to share the same principles and values of AfL - namely, that assessment is an ongoing, embedded process rather than a one off event, and that it empowers learners to become participants and co-constructors of their own learning and progression. In addition, guidance from the Welsh Government clearly states that “assessment should not be carried out for the purpose of

accountability” (ibid), but instead as a self evaluative tool for teachers and schools to reflect on their planning and development to ensure it supports the progression of students. We can therefore see a national movement towards assessment as a reflective, evaluative tool for both the student and teacher, rather than a tool for accountability and measuring teaching standards. Based on the guidance outlined in the new curriculum, we should then see Welsh education move towards more meaningful modes of assessment that align with AfL, to create a “holistic picture of the learners’ development” (ibid) - how this pans out with the national context of summative based examinations such as GCSEs, and what ‘progression’ for students truly looks like, is yet to be seen.

A number of quantitative studies have taken place since Black’s 1998 study; most noticeably, the Education Endowment Foundation (2018) found that schools that participated in their Embedding Formative Assessment programme saw students make an additional two months of progress. However, there have been criticisms of quantitative studies surrounding AfL - Bennett (2011) criticises Black and Wiliam’s original 1998 work, as it is “too disparate to be summarised meaningfully through meta-analysis” (Bennett, 2011: 11) claiming that the collection of data surrounding feedback, assessment, questioning and tests is “too diverse to be sensibly combined and summarised by a single, mean effect-size statistic” (ibid). Despite Bennett’s criticism pre-dating the Education Endowment Foundation’s research, it could be argued that his argument can also be applied here - the wide ranging techniques and activities that are considered AfL mean that it becomes almost impossible to effectively quantify the data to claim that students made an additional two months of progress. In addition to this, it would be very difficult to establish that the ‘control’ schools from the study were not using any AfL techniques, meaning that the control group could have possibly been contaminated.

Despite Bennet’s identification of the challenges that AfL brings, and the criticism surrounding empirical evidences, he identifies that AfL is a “work-in-progress” (Bennett, 2011: 21) and agrees that formative assessment should be a “critical part” in “rethink[ing] assessment from the ground up as a coherent system” (ibid: 20) - AfL is therefore considered a promising tool,

but Bennett implies that much work is needed to clarify exactly how it is implemented in schools.

A further criticism of the widespread use of AfL is the issue that learning is essentially an inferential process. A key idea of AfL strategies is that it can be used to test for student understanding, and decipher whether or not students in the class understand the content being taught - based on the student response, the teacher can then adjust the lesson to ensure all learners are making progress, and offer additional support to those who may not be showing understanding. However, Pellegrino (2001) points out that “what a student knows and what one observes a student doing are not the same thing” (Pellegrino et al., 2001: 42). For example, a student may answer a question correctly in the moment, but this does not necessarily mean they have a sound understanding of the topic. In the reverse, a student could perform poorly on a formative assessment task, but this does not necessarily mean that there is a complete lack of understanding.

Similarly, Nuthall (2005) argues that “learning takes time and is not encapsulated in the visible here-and-now of classroom activities... a student’s network of knowledge is constantly changing” (Nuthall, 2005: 992). Therefore, if we are to use AfL as a tool to establish a student's understanding, and we make decisions about what happens next based on this, we must be aware that a one off correct or incorrect answer, or a mark on a formative test, is not representative of the student’s understanding as a whole. Furthermore, there may be a number of varying factors as to why a student performs poorly or seemingly does not understand, that teachers may not be aware of. For example, a further avenue for research could be the impact of the current cost-of-living crisis, which has seen over 90% of foodbanks in the Independent Food Aid Network report an increase in demand since July 2022 (Independent Food Aid Network, 2022). If students are struggling to meet their basic, physiological needs (Maslow, 1943) such as eating enough food, and having access to warm shelter, their performance in class and ability to participate in AfL may see a significant decline, or a lack of participation in activities. It is therefore important to consider the range of factors as to why a student may be

struggling with the content of work, and recognise that our interventions in the classroom may not be effective.

Reflection

Using Kolb's (1984) reflective model, I will now reflect and evaluate on the critical incident observed, in order to identify my next steps in my professional and personal development as a teacher.

Concrete experience

The first aspect of Kolb's reflective cycle is the concrete experience - this was my experience in a school setting, observing a Year 7 mathematics classroom. As detailed in the 'Critical incident' section, I observed a teacher using various forms of assessment to gain feedback after a short quiz as a starter activity.

Reflective observation

During the observation, the students were highly engaged and on task. It was a large class of approximately 30 students, with a busy atmosphere.

As part of the whole-class feedback, the teacher asked students to shout out 'yes' or 'no' as to whether they agreed with a students' answer. I was initially wary of this approach, concerned that it may lead to further shouting out, but upon reflection, this was a good way of involving the whole class in providing feedback and keeping engagement levels high, as all students were involved.

When the teacher asked a student to come up to the board and explain how they worked out the answer, I considered the effect this may have on the student themselves. The student

seemed enthusiastic to participate in this, and confidently stood in front of the class to explain how they achieved their answer. Upon reflection, I believe that this is a good way to improve the confidence of the learner and help them to become a confident, creative individual who can share their ideas with the class. However, this does require a strong relationship with the student, a positive classroom environment, and an understanding of the students' personality and learning needs, as some students may find this daunting.

My main reflections during the session came from the varying forms of assessment used by the teacher. The teacher expertly blended in a formative quiz, peer and self assessment, and effective questioning techniques - this saw all students being responsible for their own learning, whilst creating an atmosphere of positive collaboration within the classroom. This observation inspired me to conduct further research into the literature surrounding assessment techniques.

Abstract conceptualisation

After the lesson, I began to conduct research into assessment techniques, and AfL in particular. It became clear that this teacher was using a combination of AfL techniques effectively, such as questioning and formative quizzes as Black and Wiliam (1998) describe. While I observed that the techniques used in the classroom were effective, due to the immediate student engagement, the literature reinforced the positive impact of this on the students. For example, students were involved in the learning process by collaborating with others and sharing their knowledge, and the low stakes formative quiz meant that the teacher had immediate blind feedback on how individual students were progressing in the topic. Black and Wiliam's work (1998) promoted AfL as a tool for teachers to identify the next steps that should be taken in teaching - in this instance, the blind hands-up where students told the teacher what score they received allowed the teacher to continue with the rest of the lesson at a slightly higher level of difficulty, as he knew that the majority of students received 6 or 7 out of 7 in the quiz, so were comfortable being challenged in this topic. In line with the Welsh Curriculum guidance, assessment in this lesson was fully integrated into teaching and learning, rather than a stand alone summative assessment.

Active experimentation

Moving forwards, I will be making an active effort to include AfL in my lesson plans. While there are some criticisms of AfL and the way data is interpreted to produce empirical evidence (Bennett, 2011), there is agreement that AfL strategies are a positive intervention in the classroom as a whole. We must also keep in mind that whilst teaching is essentially inferential: we cannot assume that we know exactly what a student is thinking or understanding (Pellegrino et al, 2001).

One way of including AfL is by planning the key questions that I will ask to check for understanding, and improve the critical thinking skills of the students. I will also include the use of low-stakes quizzes to test knowledge and understanding. For example, I have planned to use a quiz to remind students of what we read in the previous chapter. This will then allow me to identify where the students are in their learning, what difficulty to pitch the lesson at, and identify what students may need additional help. It will therefore be important to be reflective and adaptable in lessons, as feedback from the class or individuals may mean that tasks need to be immediately adjusted to account for a lack of understanding.

I will also plan to use whole-class feedback. In one of my recent lesson plans, I have planned to ask students how they think a certain character is feeling in a certain part of the novel. In order to include the whole class, I will then ask students to put their thumbs up or down if they agree or disagree, and then pick a student who disagrees to explain why. This aims to promote higher-order thinking, and engage the whole class in discussion.

After reviewing the literature, I believe it is also important to consider the impact of external factors on students, such as considering if their basic needs are being met. I will therefore not base the progress of students from one or two instances of AfL, but instead look holistically at their progress and be empathetic towards the learner and their circumstances, whilst considering that we cannot be sure what a student is truly knowing based on one or two

answers to an AfL technique. Furthermore, developing relationships with students will be essential in order to establish a culture of questioning, where students feel comfortable to get answers wrong, as this is simply part of the learning process.

Conclusion

As a teacher, being a reflective practitioner is essential. As described in the Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership, teachers should “show how reflection and openness to challenge... informs professional learning to progressively develop pedagogy” (Welsh Government, 2020). Similarly, the Education Workforce Council (EWC) describes how teachers should “demonstrate a shared commitment to their continuing professional learning by reflecting upon, and evaluating, their practice” (EWC, 2022). We can therefore see that having a critical reflective mindset is essential to the development of our own professional and personal practice as teachers, in order to continue learning and the development of pedagogy.

In this essay, I have reflected upon a critical incident observed while in a secondary school environment, considered and evaluated relevant literature in order to contextualise the incident in educational theory, and used this observation and theory to inform my development and next steps as a teacher in practice. Through analysis of my observations and reviewing relevant literature surrounding assessment, I have identified a number of key changes I will make going forward. This includes planning specifically for AfL strategies within my lessons, such as quizzes and questioning, whilst recognising that external factors may be influencing students’ performance and progression. In addition to this, I recognise the importance of adopting a reflective mindset whilst teaching and evaluating lessons; this will have a positive impact professionally, ensuring that professional learning is taking place, as well as a positive impact on the students, ensuring that they are receiving the best quality teaching that enables them to achieve and progress.

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