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8

ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

Key Points

This chapter will:

- Define formative and summative assessment
- Explain what makes an assessment reliable and how we can ensure that the inferences that we draw from assessments are valid
- Link assessment to planning and teaching
- Give practical suggestions for generating useful assessment evidence and providing feedback
- Suggest ways of finding a standard to assess against

Doing tests

Tests are something we all do at school. Testing is also a political issue, with some groups of parents and educators organising campaigns to affect either the content of tests or the amount of testing (e.g. Adams, 2016). Some commentators believe that testing is stressful, a contributor to mental health issues and therefore inimical to their own educational values (e.g. Weale, 2016). The maths education researcher Jo Boaler has linked timed maths test to 'maths anxiety' – a kind of stress that affects mathematics performance (Boaler, 2015), although the evidence for this claim has been disputed (Simms, 2016).

Testing conjures images of young people sat in silence in draughty exam halls. However, this is just one, particularly narrow way of finding out what students know. Moreover, this kind of testing acts best as a form of *summative* assessment: it enables us to grade or rank students and summarise what they have learnt, often at the end of a course of study. This is an important function of assessment because it allows students and parents to evaluate how they are going and to hold a school accountable. However, it is the *formative* function of assessment that is the focus for teachers.

Dylan Wiliam is an authority on formative assessment, which he defines as assessment where 'evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted and used by teachers, learners or 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 made in the absence of that evidence' (Wiliam, 2011).

In other words, formative assessment is when you *do something* with the evidence that it provides. It feeds back into the instruction – a form of feedback that is often neglected. The ways that assessment can do this range from asking a question in class before reteaching a concept that is misunderstood, all the way through to revising whole courses of study based upon evidence of strengths and weaknesses from formal assessments. It is the formal assessments – the tests – that we mostly think about when we think of assessment but it is likely that more fluid forms of assessment have as much, if not more, impact on improving the quality of instruction on a daily basis.

We should plan for *both* kinds of assessment, not just the formal kind. As we saw in Chapter 5, teachers suffer from the 'curse of knowledge' – a cognitive bias that leads sufferers to believe that a

fact or solution step that is obvious to *them* is obvious to *all*. For their part, students may suffer from the Dunning–Kruger effect, where they underestimate the extent of their own ignorance because they lack the knowledge to recognise it (Dunning et al., 2003). Add these together and you have a vicious conspiracy against assessment: teachers do not assess the obvious and students don't realise that they don't know it.

By planning for assessment, you short-circuit this problem. If a teacher is constantly confronted with the evidence of his or her students' lack of understanding then this will puncture the curse of knowledge. This assessment evidence will also help counter the Dunning–Kruger effect in students although we must take care about how it is used. As we have seen, motivation builds on self-concept and self-efficacy. This is why Barak Rosenshine advises us to obtain a high success rate (Rosenhine, 2012). If we constantly point out a student's weaknesses then this will likely be demotivating.

So the unvarnished truth is more the teachers' burden to bear, within the bounds of honesty and accountability. And this is largely as it should be. Students should be focused on the next incremental step towards mastery (Bandura and Schunk, 1981). It is for teachers to see the wider terrain and plan a route through it.

Much of the current political discussion of 'testing' suggests that it may be stressful for students and contribute to wider mental health issues (Weale, 2016). I am sure that this *can* be the case. I am also certain that skilful teachers will present assessment to their students in a calm, positive and supportive way: 'This will help us figure out what you need next. It's no big deal.'

Some schools lack a strategy for improving the levels of literacy and numeracy: subjects that are often the target of standardised testing. In these instances, it may be tempting to simply push students through lots of practice tests with the hope that they will somehow learn how to complete them implicitly. Yet, as we have seen, implicit forms of learning are not optimal unless students already possess a great deal of expertise. A small amount of practice testing is clearly desirable because it will help students to become familiar with the format, but overdoing it is likely to raise the profile of the standardised test as a big, scary event that teachers appear concerned about, while doing relatively little to improve students' performance.

Instead, the solution lies in more frequent, low-stakes assessment that targets specific learning objectives and links to identifiable

teaching strategies. If the only teaching strategy that we can think of is to ask students to practise doing it, then we have it badly wrong.

The concepts of *reliability* and *validity* are useful in understanding how different types of assessment function and the decisions that we need to make when selecting assessment tools.

Reliability

Reliability is the extent to which a person possessing the same knowledge, sitting the same test, will receive the same outcome each time. This is crucial for high-stakes systems where educational and career pathways are dependent upon the outcomes of tests. It would not be desirable for students with similar knowledge of a subject area to receive wildly different scores.

You might think this is an easy problem to solve but we need to consider the fact that formal tests only ever *sample* a body of knowledge. The subjects that we teach in school contain so much content that a test writer cannot possibly assess all of it. If an assessment focuses a great deal on an obscure corner of the course then it is unlikely to be reliable because students with a similar level of performance across the subject *as a whole* may differ in their recall and understanding of this little corner. Test writers therefore need to take care to sample across the range of subject matter and often hone certain types of question that generate reliable responses.

Three implications of this should be apparent to a teacher seeking formative information. First, to some extent teachers *can* assess the entire course rather than sample it. Second, a teacher's main aim is not to judge or rank students across an entire course but to seek improvements wherever they may lie. Third, a test question that a test designer has written in order to produce reliable outcomes will not necessarily be the best question to elicit formative information; these two objectives are different.

One way to illustrate this problem is to consider a multiple-choice question. Imagine the following mathematics question:

Which of the following shows $0.35 \div 0.5$ in its most simplified form?

A. $\frac{35}{50}$

B. $\frac{7}{10}$

C. $\frac{3}{5}$

D. $\frac{17}{25}$

A standardised test designer might write such a question, trial it and find it to be reliable. However, a maths teacher is likely to be disappointed with this question because it misses an opportunity to test for a key misconception. Many students struggle with the value of different digits in decimals and will equate $0.35 \div 0.5$ with $\frac{35}{5}$ or 7. Therefore, including this option as one of the answers will generate useful formative evidence. If large numbers of students select it, we know what to target next in our teaching.

Moreover, imagine this question is included in an assessment task that asks students to rank the following numbers in order of size: 0.24, 0.6, 0.58, 0.2. This question would be harder for a standardised test designer to assign a score. However, it assesses the same key misconception and will therefore provide additional evidence to the teacher.

In my experience, many schools start their assessment journey by analysing the outcomes of external tests. This is fine as far as it goes, but we must recognise the limitations; these tests have been designed to assess reliably rather than to provide us with information.

Validity

Unlike reliability, validity is not a property of the test itself, even if a lack of reliability can harm validity. Validity is about the *inferences* that we draw from an assessment. Does the assessment support the inferences that we have made?

To illustrate this difference, consider a learning styles assessment. This is not an assessment of knowledge and understanding but a tool designed to elicit a person's preferred learning style. Nonetheless, the concepts of reliability and validity still apply.

For instance, there is evidence that some learning style assessments are reasonably reliable (Coffield et al., 2004). The same student will be allocated the same learning style on repeated assessments. What should we do with such information? Well, one idea might be to try to teach curriculum content in the students' preferred learning styles.

Yet there is little evidence to support the idea that teaching students in their preferred learning style leads to improved performance (Pashler et al., 2008). Some have argued that labelling students in this way can be detrimental and create a negative self-perception (Dinham, 2016). It would therefore not be valid to infer from this assessment that we should teach a student in a particular way.

We may also illustrate the concept of validity by a more commonplace example. Imagine that we ask a student to write an extended argument – an essay, for instance. The essay contains a number of run-on sentences – a stylistic error. It would be tempting to infer that the student does not understand the concept of a run-on sentence and needs to be taught this concept.

However, knowing the form of a run-on sentence is declarative knowledge (knowing *that*) whereas avoiding run-on sentences in your own writing is procedural knowledge (knowing *how*). The evidence is only enough to suggest that there might be a problem with procedural knowledge in this case. And we can't even be sure about that.

Writing is an intensely complex process with a high cognitive load. At any one time, a writer has many different items to attend to (Kellogg, 2006). Perhaps the student possesses declarative knowledge of run-on sentences *and* procedural knowledge of run-on sentences but has failed to put this knowledge into practice. This might be because he or she was too busy thinking about the ideas in the argument, the structure of the argument, spelling, punctuation or all manner of other things.

In this case, our inferences about the student's knowledge of run-on sentences would not be valid. Incidentally, this is the main reason why complex performances such as whole pieces of writing, completed projects, drama productions and so on rarely yield useful formative information.

Linking planning and assessment

In the previous chapter we saw that a plan should work back from a learning objective. The role of assessment is to provide information about progress towards such learning objectives and so planning and formative assessment form part of a loop, they must connect to each other.

It seems an obvious point to make, but how can we draw inferences about teaching if we have not taught the concept that we are assessing? At best, this information may set a baseline but, at worst, it provides little useful evidence. Similarly, imagine assessing something that we have no idea how to teach. This is not as far-fetched as it may appear. For instance, the skill we are assessing might be

something that we expect students to develop implicitly. If so, such an assessment will tell us if students have acquired the skill but will give us little information about what to do if they have not.

Rather than plan a topic and then think about how to assess it at the end, we need to build formative assessment processes into our planning. This assessment must link back to specific sequences of teaching so that we can evaluate the impact *of that teaching*. We can then adjust course with current students if necessary and perhaps revise our plan for the next group of students.

Notice that this use of assessment is different to the instructional uses of assessment – spaced practice and retrieval practice – that we discussed in the previous chapter. The purpose of formative assessment is to draw inferences from the information that you collect whereas the purpose of instructional assessment is to support the learning process. However, an assessment timed to occur several weeks after the relevant teaching could provide both instructional support *and* information about how the relevant concepts have been retained.

Breaking down complex tasks

Complex performances are hard to draw inferences from because they require the interaction of content knowledge with a range of skills and therefore impose a high cognitive load for novice learners. Too often, teachers launch students into complex performances that are information rich but inference poor. As we have seen, a piece of writing might contain run-on sentences, grammatical errors, confused ideas, evidence that does not support the point being made or any number of other flaws and yet we cannot be sure of the reasons why.

One way that many teachers try to deal with this is by writing lots of 'feedback' at the end of the piece of work. It is unfortunate that so many teachers and school leaders have conflated the notion of providing feedback with writing comments in this way. It means that they interpret evidence for the positive effects of feedback, for example as presented in Hattie's influential book *Visible Learning* (Hattie, 2008), as evidence for this kind of marking when it almost certainly is not.

It seems unlikely that students will be able to process all of the information that a teacher provides in this way due to the cognitive load that this would generate. Even if they can, some of this will be redundant. For example, a student who makes grammatical errors due to the demands of the task but who can recognise these errors in isolation does not need to be told that these are grammatical errors. Compounding these problems, many teachers are encouraged to provide feedback based upon a rubric that is intended to be generic and this prompts generic feedback such as, 'in order to improve you need to develop your ideas more fully'. This may be true but it is hardly helpful.

Where rubrics highlight more specific details we run a different risk. According to Australian researcher Royce Sadler (Sadler, 2009) there are at least 50, and probably more, criteria on which to judge a piece of writing. By highlighting just a few and prompting students to pay attention to these features we risk encouraging form over substance. For instance, it may *generally* be true that good writing contains two or more complex sentences but by simply training students to produce two or more complex sentences, we will not guarantee good writing.

Not only is this kind of feedback likely to be ineffective, it is punishing for teachers. Writing comments is time-consuming and inefficient compared to simply speaking to a student. For instance, a quick test shows that I can say 'The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog' in about 2 seconds, whereas it takes me 15 seconds to write it down. As Dylan Wiliam asks (Wiliam, 2011), 'Does the teacher get the class's learning back on track with the class in front of him, in one go, and when the meanings of students' responses and the teacher's questions

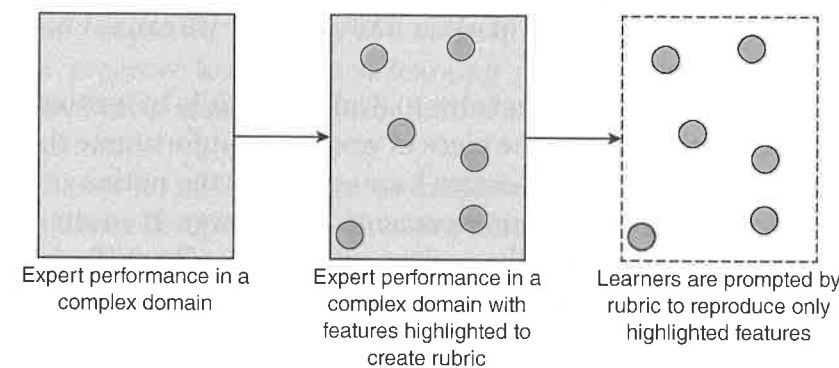


Figure 8.1 How rubrics fail

can be negotiated, or does the teacher do it one student at a time, after they have gone away, and in writing?'

Imagine a soccer coach who used a similar approach with her team. Every training would involve a practice game of soccer. At the end of every session she would then write a note to each of her players containing advice on various aspects of their performance and what to work on next. She would give these notes out at the start of the next training session. This is not, of course, how real soccer coaches work. They constantly intervene and provide verbal feedback. They gather players together and explicitly instruct them in some aspect of play.

Crucially, the repertoire of soccer training activities extends way beyond simply playing practice games. This is important because real games are unpredictable. If you want your players to improve a particular skill then you need to develop a discrete activity that targets that skill. You do not wait for the need for this skill to occur serendipitously and fleetingly in the context of a game.

Similarly, a more productive route for teachers is to break complex performances down into components that deal with specific knowledge and skills. Teachers may then provide feedback that is specific to that component and that is likely to be understood by the student who is then able to link it to that context.

The simplest way to do this is through a separation in time. If doing a number of things simultaneously will lead to cognitive overload then why not try doing them sequentially? In the case of writing, an obvious example is to have a discrete period of writing followed by a discrete period of proofreading. For instance, a student might produce an essay for homework and bring it to class. The teacher could then give over the first 20 minutes of class to proofreading the work and editing it. At least, this way, the teacher will not be faced with correcting errors that the student could have corrected herself.

If a student is writing a response to a text then one component that teachers should assess is knowledge and understanding of the text. If a student has not read the text or has misunderstood it then she will not write a good response. One way to check for this is to ask a short multiple-choice quiz. The teacher can then go through the quiz while each student assesses their own answers. If a student performs well then we know that a later lack of clarity in the complex product is not due to the student's understanding of the text. We have systematically ruled that out.

Similarly, we could design assessment tasks where students identify or generate topic sentences, distinguish sentences that analyse from those that summarise or select appropriate evidence to support a particular point. If we know that students can successfully complete these tasks in isolation and we also know that they have the relevant content knowledge then we know that a failure to put them together in a complex performance is down to the cognitive load generated by manipulating them together. The response we would then give in this situation will not be to explain what a topic sentence is.

Teaching is a more efficient way of providing feedback than writing to all of your students and so this should be a primary method. Perhaps your students might complete an introductory paragraph which they hand in at the end of the lesson. Rather than writing comments on all of them, a more efficient approach would be to simply read them and address the issues raised in a segment of explicit teaching at the start of the next lesson. You may then move on to a period of redrafting where the students can respond to this feedback. Dylan Wiliam calls this kind of routine an 'exit pass question' (Wiliam, 2011).

I have had discussions with colleagues about these ideas, and English teachers, in particular, find them deeply uncomfortable. It is as if they see marking as some form of penitential devotional act. They worry that a lack of red pen on their students' work will signal that they do not care. Yet when they try out some of these approaches, they often comment that the students did not seem to mind and quite liked the new modes of feedback. This is understandable; if the feedback is efficient then it will help students make progress that, in turn, will increase their motivation.

If you are convinced by this argument then you may come up against a problem when you want to enact it at school. Many schools or departments have marking policies that mandate a certain, often unreasonable, amount of written feedback. Some have even adopted strange policies where students have to write odd little replies to the written feedback they receive. This seems to be a corruption of the perfectly reasonable idea that feedback has to be taken on board by the student in order to have any effect and this ritual is somehow intended to demonstrate that it has been. I have

even heard of policies that ask teachers to *write down* the verbal feedback that they have given to students, thus eliminating and reversing the efficiency gains of providing verbal feedback.

It is therefore worth asking a school about its marking policy on interview. Like a lack of a behaviour policy, an absurd marking policy should act as a potential deal-breaker.

Feedback to the teacher

A related problem arises from conflating feedback with marking. One of the most powerful influences of feedback is when feedback is provided *to the teacher* (Hattie, 2008). If we lock ourselves into a cycle of asking for complex performances before providing 'feedback' on these performances then we are reflecting only on the relative strengths of our students. If a reflection on the quality of teaching comes into this *at all* then it is likely to be as an expression of frustration that those pesky teachers who taught our students in previous years didn't manage to fix their grammar issues, teach them their times-tables or inspire them with enough 'ideas'.

On the other hand, imagine selecting a key issue to address, such as the quality of topic sentences, then planning an episode where you intentionally and explicitly teach students how topic sentences work and what distinguishes good ones from bad ones. When you read the topic sentences that students later write for a component assessment you can draw inferences about the effectiveness of this teaching. It gives you agency. You start to get a feel for what works and what does not. You build a repertoire of examples, analogies and explanations that you can directly link to changes in student performance.

Finding a standard

Suppose you ask students a biology question and the average mark out of 4 is 2.3. How concerned should you be?

In one sense, it does not matter. This question-level data has enabled you to discover something that your students cannot reliably do and so this is potentially formative information.

If the question comes from a standardised test then you might be able to glean additional helpful data. For instance, the country or state might publish the average scores for each question across the entire cohort so you can compare your students' scores with this cohort score. If the cohort score is 3.3 out of 4 then you might want to prioritise the concepts assessed by this question and perhaps generate some more instructional and formative assessment tasks that target these same concepts. If the cohort score is 1.2 out of 4 then your students have done pretty well in comparison to the cohort. It might simply be the case that this kind of question is particularly difficult or maybe it is badly designed with confusing wording.

This illustrates the value of having some kind of standard to measure against. It enables you to prioritise the concepts to address most urgently and it gives you a sense of the level of performance that we might typically expect of students studying the same content. If your students are from similar backgrounds to the cohort average then you might even be able to draw some loose inferences about the relative effectiveness of your teaching in particular areas. If not, then over time you might get a feel for how your students generally track against this cohort and look for areas where this pattern breaks down.

Unfortunately, many subject areas and year levels have no standardised testing to draw upon. In this case, there are two alternative ways of establishing some kind of standard.

The first method is to run the same, or a very similar, assessment in successive years. This is a strong way of establishing the progress of a teaching programme over time. You can look at changes you have made in one year and infer whether they have had an effect. This works well for small schools or elective subjects where there is only one class at each year level. One drawback is that it takes at least a year to establish a standard. In addition, any change to the curriculum will make it hard to reuse assessments. In my experience, politicians and school leaders are endlessly 'innovating' with the curriculum and so this is a major issue. Nevertheless, if you cannot rerun an assessment in its entirety then you may be able to run parts of it. This another reason why it is essential to collect data at the level of performance on individual questions rather than just a total for the assessment.

If more than one teacher is teaching the same course to the same year group of students, then there is the potential to compare data between those groups. This can be a little confronting for teachers but, provided nobody gets hanged, after a while a team will build up enough trust for this to work well. Even if the groups are not evenly matched in their prior achievement, you can still draw useful inferences. For instance, we may expect a lower-achieving group to generally underperform a higher one, but what of those questions where the pattern is reversed? How did the teaching of those concepts differ?

In many schools the answer will be: in lots of different ways. Teacher A taught the causes of the First World War using a card-sort activity with students grouped at tables before reporting to the class whereas Teacher B used a more direct approach involving chalk and talk. It is hard to work out what has potentially caused any difference. Yet if teachers plan jointly, as described in the previous chapter, then the ways that different classrooms vary will be more limited and so this offers the potential to zero-in on specific examples, explanations or strategies that may have been more effective.

In my own maths department, I recall a discussion where it was clear that the students in one teacher's class had outperformed the students in the other classes on a particular question type. All the teachers were using the same resources and same examples. When asked, the successful teacher could not think of anything that he had done differently. Finally, we asked him to stand at the front and show us how he had taught a specific example. It turned out that he was inserting an addition step into the solution method, the benefits of which were immediately obvious to the other teachers, so we wrote that step into the materials for *every* class for the following year.

Conclusion

Assessment is not testing; it is much broader than that and includes everything from asking questions in class to sitting formal examinations. The primary goal of most of the assessment conducted by teachers is to draw valid inferences that will feed back in to teaching in some way. This includes everything from identifying needs to address with a particular student or class to tweaking or completely redesigning teaching sequences for future groups of students.

Feedback is not marking; it is much broader than that and can often be accomplished more efficiently by giving feedback on common issues to groups of students rather than individually and in writing. Feedback also includes the notion of feedback *to the teacher*. Unless teachers can connect assessment evidence to an episode of teaching then it is not very helpful in improving the effectiveness of teachers.

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