

Assessing Projects: Successful Assessment Professional Development

What Teachers Need to Implement Formative Assessment

Even though the teachers in the King's-Medway-Oxfordshire Formative Assessment Project had substantial help and advice from Black and William's team of researchers, they still faced numerous challenges. Without extensive support, efforts to integrate formative assessment into instruction are likely to be less successful than they could be. The changes in instructional practices that go along with the effective use of formative and summative assessments do not happen quickly or without some anxiety and frustration. Black and his colleagues (2003) found that

...although the classrooms of most of the teachers involved in the project were changed radically, this change was gradual and slow. Half-way through the project, (i.e. after a year), many of the teachers had changed only small details in their practice and although these changes were significant changes for them, the outward appearance was that little had changed.... However, during the second half of the project, the changes became much more radical and for many of the teachers, the various techniques that they had adopted cohered to form a unified approach to formative assessment (p. 112).

Learning, for teachers as well as students, is not easy. "Learning, real learning, is hard work. You read, you think, you talk. You get something wrong, you don't understand something, you try it again. Sometimes you hit a wall in your thinking, sometimes it is just too frustrating. Yes, learning can be fun and inspiring but along the way, it usually makes us miserable" (Wilson & Berne, 1999, p. 200). For teachers who have been successful in a teacher-centered classroom, and even for novices who have had extensive experiences as students in traditional environments, moving to a student-centered classroom that focuses on ongoing and authentic assessment can seem overwhelming.

In order for teachers to make the leap from teacher-centered classrooms to incorporating formative assessment into student-centered instruction, they must be motivated to do the work necessary to make the change; they must have the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful, and they must have institutional support.

A study conducted by the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education found that 73% of 800 teachers surveyed participated in professional development to improve the achievement of their students (Renyi, 1996). Certainly, the benefits of formative assessments, particularly in the areas of helping students become more independent learners, suggested by research (Black, et al, 1998) can motivate teachers to do the work necessary to make ongoing assessment part of everyday life in their classrooms. Coverage of content is also more efficient in classrooms where students can take responsibility for their own learning. "Teachers report getting more done in the curriculum, more hands-on activities occur, and more learning takes place during years with self-directed learners in a classroom" (Buchler, 2003).

Teachers also need to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to organize their instruction around formative assessment. Teaching our students to think deeply about content requires a kind of knowledge beyond an advanced understanding of the subject matter. We need to thoroughly understand the basic concepts of the discipline (Askew, Brown, Rhodes, William, & Johnson, 1997) and to understand the different ways in which students think about the subjects they are studying, the misconceptions they may have, and have at our disposal a variety of metaphors, analogies, and examples that will help our students understand abstract concepts (Black, et al., 2003).

Some teacher education programs do not address higher-order thinking skills in a concrete way, so that teachers can observe what they look like at different levels, and how to teach students the thinking skills they need to complete projects. In addition, teachers need instruction and practice on the skills important for assessment, such as recording anecdotal observations, giving written and oral feedback, and analyzing the information collected from various types of assessment.

Finally, teachers must have extensive support; for without it, even if they acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to integrate assessment into instruction, decades of failed educational initiatives suggest that even very good ideas, such as this one, will fail without it.