

Eyes on the Prize:

Creating Lifelong Learners through Engagement with Assessment

Peter Wolstencroft

Georgina Gretton

Liverpool John Moores University, UK

Key words: assessment, engagement, passivity

Introduction

In his seminal RSA lecture, Sir Ken Robinson summed up the prevailing view of assessment as one where to every question, there is one answer... and it is at the back of the book (Robinson 2010). Assessment, in the world Robinson describes, is seen as summative and is populated with predetermined outcomes that students feel they have to meet.

The focus in this model potentially describes many current assessment practices, which stifle divergence, collaboration and creativity. It also suggests a passivity in learners who come to understand that their role is not to embrace the process of learning, but instead to ensure that they acquire new knowledge and channel it into the accompanying assessment (Coffield and Williamson 2011). A formulaic process emerges that does not activate deep learning, but merely acts as an exploration of a finite topic to a finite depth with a goal of securing a pre-defined outcome.

Background

In compulsory education systems such as that of the UK, learners progress year on year, regardless of performance. As a consequence, this inevitability breeds a view of assessment as a series of hurdles to be cleared rather than organically occurring indicators of learning that can prompt engagement towards enriching the learning process (Earl 2014).

The alternative approach we suggest is to move the focus from assessment back onto learning. Rather than viewing learning as a vehicle to secure assessment outcomes, learners should be encouraged to engage with their learning and come to understand that assessment is about the capturing of what students know, understand, think and can do (Johnson 2012). In this form, learning represents active engagement with the subject content wrapped in rich context and appropriate pedagogy, building full and purposeful pictures, replacing passive quests for predefined answers.

Assuming that some aspects of Robinson's analysis may be present in the current system, our aim is to explore how we can further engage teachers and learners to get the most from assessment and feedback processes, outlining barriers and associated suggestions for overcoming them.

There has already been progress in this approach, which has become more visible in recent years, through cross-curricular exploration, the removal of levels and emphasis on mastery within the primary phase (DfE 2013). This was designed to provide an

impetus for pedagogical change, increasing pupil motivation and engagement and making better use of formative assessment in the classroom (CAWL 2015).

Barrier 1 – Assessment as Hurdles

The first barrier is rooted in the belief that the current system stresses the importance of **processing** learners rather than **assessing** them (Schunk 1996). In such a system, learning design is behaviouristic and summative in nature (in this instance behaviouristic refers to learners looking for the predefined response to the assessment stimulus), with learners and teachers focusing on the end assessment rather than the learning that precedes it. This means that there is an emphasis on ‘getting through’ assessments rather than embracing their potential for formative improvement. This is especially true given that summative assessment is often decontextualised, which encourages all involved to see it as a hurdle disconnected from other components, rather than an integral part of a bigger whole (Koffka 1925).

To prevent learners seeing assessments as hurdles to clear, a switch of focus from assessment *of* learning to assessment *for* learning (William 2011) is necessary. This requires learners and teachers to interact continuously and become co-creators of an ongoing formative process. This is common in the Primary phase where learning and assessment are interlinked and become far more discursive rather than tick box orientated. This is possible because primary teachers work with the same learners across lesson sequences and subjects and therefore can make connections between content and context as well as harnessing information from learning to plan and assess formatively. This is further achieved through creativity in approaches across

feedback formats: written marking and commentary; verbal discussion; inclusion in subsequent planning content and response time built into a cohort's timetable.

In other phases of education, this may be more difficult to accomplish due to institutional design, and could be the reason why Wolstencroft and de Main (2020) found that feedback and information around learning, was only accessed by a quarter of students, meaning that advice was not engaged with nor actioned.

There seems to be greater engagement dependent on the form of the feedback, as 92% of learners in Zimbardi et al's (2016) study accessed their feedback when presented in audio format. Whilst the figures in Wolstencroft and de Main's (2020) study were slightly lower, they still represented a significant improvement from written forms. The next step after audio feedback is to introduce video feedback, where using tools already familiar to learners is imperative. West and Turner's (2016) work showed how learners are more engaged and felt feedback was more personalised, when it was delivered through the visual medium.

Barrier 2 – The whole is not yet greater than the sum of its parts

For feedback to be meaningful, it must cross lesson, subject and module boundaries to build a 'bigger picture' rather than reinforcing a disconnection of learning and assessment.

In the Secondary and Post-Compulsory phases, the curriculum is often compartmentalised, with clear mapping of vertical progression within subjects, but

less awareness of horizontal connections, continuity and context that could support learners (Bruner, 1960). Silos form and communication between each area becomes minimal, in contrast with much of the Primary phase, where themes for each term are selected and individual subjects are linked to help learners make sense of the overarching picture, which also provides rich, layered opportunities for in-depth learning and assessments.

The first solution involves communication within the organisation and ensuring learners and teachers can see the coherency of the curriculum. This means that teachers are more able to identify similarities in what is being learned in other areas and use this to inform more appropriate learning design decisions in their own sessions: building on content and increasing their ability to formatively activate support and challenge rather than waiting for summative, disconnected assessment points.

Secondly, the design of assessments can have a significant impact and become reflective of curriculum learning design. Once coherency of curriculum is clear, it is possible to develop one assessment for multiple aspects of learning, ensuring the connection of the dots within the big picture, hence moving away from multiple small-scale assessments for individual subjects. The use of a shared context helps underpin such forms of learning and assessment, giving students a purposeful representation of how their learning is relevant in real life rather than designed solely for summative assessment.

Barrier 3 – Feedback is not Meaningful to the Learner

The idea of learning having purpose, leads us to our final barrier, which is ensuring that feedback is valuable in scaffolding learners' further development. It is important to ensure that the learner can identify this knowledge from the feedback that they are given and how it is relevant to their own individual big picture of learning.

Electronic assessment software such as 'Speed Grader' and 'Quickmark' are marketed on their ability to reduce the administrative load for teachers and whilst this is true, using programmes that contain generic comments across marking and grading rubrics can lead to feedback that fails to be personalised to individual needs (France and Wheeler 2007), something that potentially reinforces learner passivity. The relevant, uniformed and transferable phrases and descriptors that allow consistency to develop, are potentially perceived by learners as faceless and generic comments, disconnected from the specific assessment piece.

Whilst these approaches can have benefits in terms of ensuring students see exactly what they need to *do* in order to be awarded the next grade up, quite often being able to identify *what* a summative grade band dictates, does not always correlate to having the learning to know *how* to achieve it, which would develop formatively far more effectively in smaller steps, linking to more qualitative formats of feedback. Learners may need training in responding actively, such as identifying patterns of generic comments across multiple pieces and the joined up messages that arise upon closer inspection and can be applied across multiple areas of their learning.

Whilst getting learners to engage with qualitative comments can be challenging, the solutions lie in ensuring that teachers focus on the content and delivery of feedback. The content of feedback should be delivered in an actionable way to overcome barriers of passivity: perhaps bullet pointed steps that feed into other areas of learning and assessment. Arguably, if feedback content and delivery is communicated through an appropriate medium that learners are motivated and able to engage with, it can lead to a meaningful change in learners' behaviour and response.

Conclusions:

Returning to Robinson (2010) and William (2011), whenever we look at assessment and learning, it is important to remember that the purpose of all feedback is formative and must be used by learners and teachers to feed into future improvement. This helps to move learners away from a passive state where they see their role as waiting for a summative 'hurdle' to take place and then moving to the next one when it has been cleared.

Across the solutions volunteered in this article, some key messages arise:

- Context, established through sharing of information and communication, can be used as a powerful tool to establish and connect smaller episodes of learning and assessment into big picture understanding. Using 'real world' assessment that learners can relate to can be a powerful way of making learning and consequently assessment, meaningful.
- Feedback should be given through an appropriate medium that a learner has the ability to actively engage with, relating appropriately to learner knowledge

and skills. Audio and video approaches have worked well in engaging more learners.

- A consistency of approach, such the use of marking guides, across all areas of curriculum will support learners to understand their journey and the processes involved, motivating and empowering them to move away from being a passive bystander to an active participant.

References

- Bruner, J. S. (1960). *The Process of education*. Cambridge, Mass.:Harvard University Press
- Coffield F and Williamson B (2011) *From Exam Factories to Communities of Discovery*. London:IOE.
- Department for Education (2013) *National Curriculum in England: Primary Curriculum*. London: Crown.
- Earl L (2014) *Assessment as Learning* (2nd edition). Hawker Brownlow Education.
- France D and Wheeler A (2007) Reflections on Using Podcasting for Student Feedback. *Planet* 18(1):9–11. doi:10.11120/plan.2007.00180009.
- Johnson S (2012) *Assessing and Learning in the Primary Classroom*. Oxon:Routledge.
- Koffka K (1925) *International library of psychology, philosophy and scientific method. The growth of the mind: An introduction to child-psychology*. (R. M. Ogden, Trans.). Harcourt Brace & Company. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13440-000>
- Prensky M (2001) Digital natives, digital immigrants, part 1. *On the Horizon* 9(5):1-6.
- Robinson K (2010) Changing the Paradigm RSA Lecture. Available at: <https://www.thersa.org/comment/2010/10/rsa-animate---changing-education-paradigms> (accessed 21 December 2020).
- Schunk, D (1996), Goal and Self-evaluative Influences during Children's Cognitive Skill Learning, *American Educational Research Journal*, 33(1):359-382.
- The Commission on Assessment without Levels (2015) Commission on Assessment Without Levels: Final Report. London:DfE online.
- West J and Turner W (2016) Enhancing the Assessment Experience: improving student perceptions, engagement and understanding using online video feedback. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 53(4):400-410, DOI: [10.1080/14703297.2014.1003954](https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2014.1003954)
- William D (2011) What is Assessment for Learning? *Studies in Educational Evaluation* 37(1):3-14.
- Wolstencroft P and de Main L (2020) 'Why didn't you tell me that before?' Engaging undergraduate students in feedback and feedforward within UK higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, DOI: [10.1080/0309877X.2020.1759517](https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2020.1759517)

Zimbardi K, Colthorpe K, Dekker A, Engstrom C, Bugarcic, A, Worth, P, Victor, R, Chunduri P, Lluka L and Long P (2016) "Are They Using My Feedback?" The Extent of Students' Feedback Use Has a Large Impact on Subsequent Academic Performance. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 42(4):625–644
doi:10.1080/02602938.2016.1174187