

Key Resource: Assessing learning

Assessment

Assessment falls into two categories. One category looks back and makes a judgement on what has been learned already. This is called summative assessment. The second category is when we use assessment as part of the learning process (for example when we use questioning to check whether pupils have understood something). We call this formative assessment.

Summative assessment can be seen in the form of tests and marks which tell the pupils how well they have done in a particular subject or piece of work.

Formative assessment is quite different. Formative assessment – or assessment for learning – is based on the idea that pupils will improve most if:

- they understand what it is they are meant to learn;
- they know where they are now;
- they can see how they can close the gap between these two.

As a teacher, you will get the best out of your pupils if you aim to use the three points above, which makes assessment as much a responsibility for the pupil as it is for the teacher. How does this work?

Pupils understanding what it is they are meant to learn

When you decide the learning outcomes for a topic or a piece of work you should share it with the pupils. You need to be clear by distinguishing not just what it is they have to DO, but what it is you are expecting them to LEARN. So to check they have understood, rather than saying 'Have you all understood?' ask a question that gives you the chance to assess whether they have really understood. For example:

- 'Who can explain in their own words what we have to do and what we aim to learn?'
- 'How can you make me sure that you have understood what I have just said?'
- 'So what is it we are going to do today?'

Their answers will enable you to know if they understand what it is they have to learn before they start. Give them time to explore the true meaning of your

learning outcomes.

Knowing where they are now in their learning process

In order to help pupils improve, you and they need to know the current state of their knowledge. It is your role to be sensitive, constructive and enthusiastic in finding out the current state of knowledge of your pupils. Insensitive comments and behaviour can have a damaging effect on pupil confidence, motivation and enthusiasm. Think back to those teachers who damaged your own confidence and enthusiasm, and do not follow their behaviour. Instead, when you talk to pupils about their current learning, make sure that they find your feedback both useful and constructive. Do this by:

- pinpointing pupils' strengths and suggesting how they might further improve them;
- being clear about weaknesses and positive about how they might be tackled, checking that pupils understand and are positive about your advice;
- checking with pupils for examples of your feedback that they found useful. Assessment for learning is a two-way process.

Closing the learning gap

You will need to provide opportunities for pupils to improve their work. This means that by talking to them about their work you may discover misconceptions that mean you have to modify the content and style of what you have been teaching if you want to close the gap between where they are now and where you wish them to be.

Very often, by slowing down with a group of pupils you can actually speed up, because you have given them time and confidence to think and understand what they need to do to improve. By letting pupils talk about their work amongst themselves and reflecting on where the gaps are and how they might close them, you are providing them with ways to assess themselves.

Key to all this is you, the teacher, demonstrating a belief in your pupils, giving constructive guidance on how to improve and providing opportunities for them to take charge of their own learning.