

Assessment for learning, also called formative assessment or classroom assessment, is one research-based method for improving teaching quality and student learning. The following two articles provide an introduction to assessment for learning.

Assessment for Learning: Improving Teaching Quality and Test Scores

by Dylan William, Educational Testing Service

"I'd love to teach for deep understanding, but I have to raise my students' test scores." I have heard this sentiment from hundreds of teachers, both in the United States, and in many other countries. Implicit in this statement is the notion that raising test scores is not compatible with teaching for deep understanding. Given No Child Left Behind's mandate for raising test scores, does this mean that there is no room for teaching for deep understanding? Or is there a way to achieve both?

Over the course of a 10-year study, Paul Black and I sought to find out if using assessment to support

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learning, rather than just to measure its results, can improve students' achievement, even when such achievement is measured in the form of state-mandated tests. In reviewing 250 studies from around the world, published between 1987 and 1998, we found that a focus by teachers on assessment *for* learning, as opposed to assessment *of* learning, produced a substantial increase in students' achievement (Black and William, 1998a). Since the studies also revealed that day-to-day classroom assessment was relatively

rare, we felt that considerable improvements would result from supporting teachers in developing this aspect of their practice (Black and William, 1998b). The studies did not reveal, however, how this could be achieved and whether such gains would be sustained over an extended period of time.

In 1999, we began working with a group of 24 secondary school mathematics and science teachers (later expanded to 48) on developing the use of assessment for learning in the classroom. We summarized for the teachers the main findings of the research and then collaborated with them on how these broad findings could be incorporated into classroom practice in an authentic way.

We firmly believed that teachers needed to work out on their own what the research might mean in the context of their own classrooms. Each teacher was encouraged to develop an action plan that he or she would implement beginning the following September with a new class. The teachers identified a total of about 20 strategies for implementing assessment for learning in their classrooms (Black et al., 2003), which included:

Questioning: using questions to probe for deep understanding; giving students more time to answer.

Feedback: using scores and grades only at the end of marking periods; focusing feedback on how to improve, rather than on how well the student had done; having tests two-thirds of the way through a unit to allow time to remedy misunderstandings.

Peer-assessment and self-assessment: giving students rubrics and time to assess their own and each other's work; identifying priorities for review.

The results were dramatic. At the end of the 1999-2000 year, the performance on externally set tests of the students taught by the project teachers was significantly higher than that of other students in the same schools (Black et al., 2003).

We have found similar effects in subsequent studies in the United Kingdom, and are currently carrying out replications in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. The results to date suggest that teachers don't have to choose—the best way to improve students' test scores is to teach well.

References

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Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B., & William, D. (2003). *Assessment for learning: Putting it into practice*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press. [This book is available for purchase through RBS Publications at <http://www.rbs.org/catalog>.]

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