

Activating learners: as owners of their own learning, and as learning resources for one another.

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IN two previous articles I outlined [how assessment can be used to improve learning as well as measure it](#), and looked at [why assessment is at the heart of effective teaching](#), whether this is done in face-to-face, hybrid, or remote sessions. However, to really harness the power of assessment to improve learning, we must also bring the learners into the process.

As the outset, I should make clear that this is not easy, because it involves striking a careful balance between two extremes. At one extreme are the teachers who believe that it is their job to do the learning for the learner. They work very hard, often harder than their students, which is why I often suggest to teachers that if their students are going home at the end of the day less tired than the teacher, then the division of labour in their classrooms requires adjustment.

At the other extreme are those who believe that they should just “facilitate” learning. They set tasks for their students and think they should not interfere. When I see such teaching, I wonder whether the teacher is doing anything

more than just hanging around, waiting for some learning to happen.

Of course, neither of these two extreme views are sensible. As Linda Allal has pointed out, teachers do not create learning. Only learners create learning. But what the teacher can do is to create a learning environment where this learning takes place. The role of the teacher is to create what Guy Brousseau has called “didactical situations”—situations that have been carefully designed to make it likely that the intended learning does take place—but then to monitor carefully what is happening, and, where necessary, intervene.

Judging whether to intervene or not is difficult. As the work of Elizabeth and Robert Bjork has shown, if the students do not encounter what they call “desirable difficulties” (Bjork & Bjork 2009, p. 58) in completing an instructional task, students may well complete the task satisfactorily, but they will not remember much of this later—as Daniel Willingham has noted, “memory is the residue of thought” (Willingham, 2009, p. 54); students remember what they have been thinking about. But if they struggle too much, then they may give

up, or become cognitively overloaded, which also reduces learning (Sweller, Kalyuga & Ayres, 2011). Teachers need to be constantly monitoring their students, focusing less on what the teacher is putting into the process and more on what the learners are getting out of it, and then intervening, either to support students who lack confidence, or who are stuck, or to provide additional challenge to learners who are finding the work easy.



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Twenty years ago, when Paul Black, Christine Harrison, Clare Lee and I began working with teachers to help them develop their use of formative assessment, we found that it was difficult to change what teachers were doing in classrooms without also changing what students were doing.

For example, many students accept that they have to do “work”, which they hand in to the teacher. In turn, the teacher assesses it and returns to the students with comments or grades. Some students believe that this should be the end of the process. “I did my work” they say, and think that should be the end of the matter. Whatever the quality of the work, such students think that it is unfair—or even illegitimate—to be asked to correct or improve their work. Other students accept that, if the work was not good enough, then it is fair to ask them to correct things that are incorrect, or to improve the quality of the work, but once this is done, again, that is the end of the matter.

From such a perspective, it is not surprising that some students, when they are asked to assess their own work, or that of their peers, often say to the teacher, “That’s your job.” The problem here, of course, is that while work is important, it is just a means to an end, rather than an end in itself.

Before we try to activate students as owners of their own learning, and as learning resources for one another, therefore, we need to ensure that students understand this fundamental principle. The purpose of being at school is not to “do work” but to learn, and if what students need to learn has not been learned, then something needs to be done.

Of course many teachers understand this, and so they encourage students to engage in self-assessment, but such efforts often fail because self-assessment is hard to do in practice, for two reasons. The first is that self-assessment is an *emotional* process. Many children (and many adults!) dislike checking or reading over their own work. The second is that self-assessment is *cognitively demanding* because it involves holding in one’s mind a concept of what good work should look like while at the same time monitoring one’s progress towards that goal. This is why peer-assessment can be such a valuable process, because it can act as a “stepping stone” towards self-assessment.

One practical technique for doing this is to start by getting students to assess the work of anonymous others. Because they do not know who produced the work, the emotional engagement is reduced, and the process is less cognitively demanding because students can concentrate on comparing the sample being assessed with either their own ideas of quality, or any materials such as scoring guides or descriptions of quality work—what are sometimes called “assessment rubrics”. They can then move on to assessing the work of actual peers, and then, later on, they will be ready to begin assessing their own work. It will still be an emotional process, but it should be less cognitively demanding because now they know what good work looks like, so comparing is easier.

One suggestion for getting students to take the process of peer assessment seriously comes from research on co-operative learning which shows that it is more effective when students have group goals (so students are working as a group, not just in a group) and members of the group are individually accountable for putting forward their best learning efforts (Slavin et al 2003). So, when students provide comments on a peer’s work, the teacher might collect the comments students have given each other and display them to the class (anonymously of course!) and lead a discussion about whether these were helpful comments to get. Students have told us that the fact that they knew that the whole class would be discussing the comments they had given their partner, even though they were displayed anonymously, made them take it more seriously, because they did not want a comment they had given their partner described as unhelpful.

Another important point to bear in mind is that we should not expect students to know how to give constructive, useful advice, and here, the “ladder of feedback” suggested by Wilson et al (2005) can be very helpful:

- Clarify:** Ask clarifying questions to be sure you understand what your peer has done
- Value:** Express what you like about the work.
- Concerns:** Say what puzzles you or concerns you about the work, using phrases like “I wonder”
- Suggest:** Make suggestions about how the work could be improved.

In our work with teachers over the last twenty years, my colleagues and I have identified a number of

techniques that can be used to begin the process of activating students as owners of their own learning and as learning resources for one another. Some of these are very specific, and work only in very specific circumstances. However, some of the techniques are much more widely applicable, and some of these are described below.

Group questions: After teaching a topic, rather than asking the whole class if anyone has any questions, the teacher organizes the students into groups of four or five students and *demand*s one question from each group. After all, if no-one in your group has an answer to your question, it's not a foolish question.

Best composite response: When students are preparing for important tests or examinations, it is a good idea for them to do practice tests, under test conditions. The problem with this, of course, is that scoring these tests creates a great deal of work for the teacher. So, rather than scoring the tests herself, the teacher collects in the students' test papers at the end of the session, and, next day, each group of four students gets back their four test papers, and one blank answer sheet, and their task is, as a group, to compile the best composite response they can. The danger with this, as the work of Graham Nuthall (2007) has shown, is that confident students can often give incorrect advice to their peers, so it is important that the teacher checks that students have not been misleading each other by leading a whole-class discussion where each group puts forward its answers to each question.

Traffic lights: In parallel with developing students' abilities to work together, the teacher can also develop students' ability to assess their own work, but in doing this, it is important to note that the fact that a student thinks they know something does not mean that they do. In fact, it is now well established that the less someone knows about a topic, the more likely they are to overstate their level of knowledge (Kruger &

Dunning, 1999). This means that just asking students to self-assess by giving themselves a "traffic light" (red/yellow/green) is not a particularly effective technique. Similar problems arise when teachers use a technique like "from fist to five" in which students indicate their confidence in their understanding of what is being taught by raising up to five fingers to show how sure they are they understand. Since lower-achieving students are more likely to overstate their level of knowledge, there is little useful information in the students' responses. What the teacher can do is to "anchor" the response in some way, for example by making it clear that "green" or five fingers is an indicator that they feel ready to teach someone else.

Plus/minus/interesting: After completing a piece of work, students reflect on the work and write down one thing they found easy, one thing they found hard, and one thing they found interesting about the work. Even when these perceptions are not very accurate, this process of reflection seems to help students become clearer about what they are struggling with, which means they can ask for help in a way that helps the teacher understand what the problem is.



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Learning portfolio: One way of persuading students that they are making progress is to keep two portfolios of work. One—the presentation portfolio—showcases the latest and best work. The other—the learning portfolio—includes earlier work to show the learning journey, and shows the student how much better their work is now than

it used to be, which reinforces the idea that “by working, you’re getting smarter”.

Zero-stakes testing: Perhaps the most neglected self-assessment technique in schools world-wide is that of doing practice tests on what you have been studying. There is now a huge amount of evidence that testing oneself on what one is learning has a greater impact on long-term retention than the same amount of time restudying the material (Dunlosky et al., 2013). Of course, students don’t like being tested, so one way that we can “rehabilitate” testing is by asking students, at the end of a period of study, to complete a test on what they have been learning, and when they have finished the test, they are given the answers. They can then score their own work, and do not even have to tell the teacher how they did unless they want to. Just completing a test improves long-term learning, and when students find out that something they were sure was right is in fact incorrect, they remember the correct answer for longer (Butterfield & Metcalfe, 2001).

Feedback that works towards its own redundancy:

Over the last forty years, I have often been asked to observe teachers and to provide feedback at the end of the lesson. At the end of just about every lesson I have ever observed, the first thing the teacher asks me is, “How did I do.” Rather than answer the question, I now ask, “How do you think you did?” I am not doing this to avoid the question. I do this because if the teacher gives me a good answer to that question, my work here is done. That teacher is well on the way to becoming what psychologists call a “self-regulating learner”—someone who can look after their own learning. This illustrates the intimate relationship between self-assessment and feedback (whether from a teacher or a peer). The main purpose of feedback is not to improve the work, but to improve the learner, and so good feedback makes feedback less necessary in the future. If we keep in mind the idea that feedback should work towards its own redundancy, then we are more likely to give the kind of feedback that actually builds resilient, autonomous learners, which is essential, because there won’t always be someone around to help!

Closing thoughts

Activating learners as owners of their own learning, and as learning resources for one another will always be challenging. Teachers need to take many things into account, such as the current achievement of the students, how happy students are to struggle, at least for a while, because they know that it is that struggle that makes them smarter, and creating an environment that both supports and challenges learners. It is also important that one size does not fit all here. Different teachers will find different ways of incorporating these ideas into their practice—after all, the aim of professional development is not to make each teacher a clone of every other teacher, but to help each teacher be the best they can be. But there is now considerable evidence that supporting learners to take greater ownership of their own learning is one of the most powerful focuses for teacher professional development, and one of the most powerful ways of increasing students achievement.



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