Intuyu Consulting | Empowering 21st Century Learning

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Assessment and Processes to Develop Active Learning: Part I

How do we know that a learner has learnt something?

Is it from one off tests? Is it from their performance in rich learning tasks? Is it from reflection at the end of term as you do your reports? Is it from keep a track of what your students submit?

How do YOU measure if learning has occurred?

In most school systems reporting processes require teachers to assign grades or some number measure to indicate children have reached particular knowledge, understandings, or skill standards.

But does it REALLY indicate that the learner has understood the concepts, has the skills, or even can use the knowledge they have gained?

My opinion is that you can't **actually** measure whether or not learning has occurred. Not until we have the technology to measure the changes in the pattern of neurons and their linkage to one another in each and every individual can we have any definitive idea of whether learning has occurred – and it still may not represent the learning WE want them to learn!

In reality, we are *guessing* whether or not a learner has "learnt" something. Some teachers may better than others at guessing. Some teachers and schools have more rigorous approaches to guessing and some don't. The best we can do is, as an indicator that learning has occurred, is if the student demonstrates a particular behaviour OVER TIME. We then can say that that behaviour indicates they have reached a particular stage of development in that skill or understanding of the material that was covered. This assigning of an interpretation to particular demonstrable behaviour is the BEST we can do at assessing learning.

This is consistent with what Jim Knight in a recent ASCD post pointed out:

"We can experience learning in two ways: as surface learning or deep learning. When we experience surface learning, we make minor adjustments or try something out for a while, but we don't take significant steps forward. Deep learning, on the other hand, is learning that changes our assumptions about how we do what we do. Deep learning gets to the core of who we are, and because deep learning leads to profound change, it really does make a difference."

But let's get real here … are you as a teacher or your school set up to work out whether a student has demonstrated a particular behaviour over time? I have found in working across 300 schools around Australia that very few schools are even thinking from that place – let alone have organised their systems and processes to be able to measure learner behaviour over time. Fewer still have the unpacked what particular behaviour around the attainment of specific learning goals could look like at progressive stages.

I am writing this to challenge an underlying assumption I have seen held in many schools and by many teachers about what their assessment is telling them. I am NOT saying that you are doing it all wrong – but it is worth exploring the underlying assumptions we hold as educators and educational organisations about what and why we assess. In many ways this line of thought has been sparked by a recent discussion that Dylan Wiliams and David Didau have been having about Formative Assessment. You can read more here, here and here about what they have been debating. It is worth reading just to start thinking.

You may notice that I am having a little rant in the process of writing – part of this stems from several discussions I have had with different teachers at different schools recently and in the past (Why do we have Grades).

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In my view, if we are to assess for learning we first need to have a clear articulation of what that skill, knowledge or understanding would look like when the learner demonstrates it. In many cases teachers have a fair idea of what it looks like anecdotally. The more experienced and expert a teacher the more they know - by seeing it. Yet I don't find that this 'anecdotal knowing' is converted into clear statements that are available to other learners (whether they are teachers or students).

What I do find mostly are summative rubrics with generalized broad statements being used as "formative rubrics" with the hope that the students (and any on lookers) will understand what is meant. For example this aspect of a rubric a teacher created to assess a magazine produced by Grade 3-4 students:

Needs Improvement	Good	Excellent
Labelled and Formatted images were included in each section	Appropriate, labelled and formatted images were included in each section.	Appropriate, well-labelled and well-formatted images were included in each section.

If I was a student looking at those rubric statements above I would be confused as to what would be "appropriate", "well-labelled" and "well-formatted" images. What is written does not make anything distinct for me.

I spent a little time with the teacher who wrote the above statements to actually get clear about what she saw – physically on the page - in the magazines her students created that would have her rate the student at the level of needs improvement, good and excellent. The revised rubric now looks like:

Needs Improvement	Good	Excellent
Labelled and Formatted images were included in each section	Plus/ • Chosen images are appropriate to the material in each section	Plus/ • Labels on image described the image and elaborate on a point in the text of that section • Image is formatted on the page in a way that makes the page esthetically pleasing.

Notice that we have unpacked what the higher levels of labelled and formatted means in a more accessible way. Appropriate now refers to the subject of the material in each section. The teacher would still have to distinguish particular words used in the rubric, she would still have to model and have examples of what each stage would look like during her classes but the rubric is developmental and much clearer to someone who is not that particular teacher.

As a piece of homework for you …questioning is one of the critical thinking skills that is key to the development of 21st century learners (or independent learners). If you are a primary / elementary teacher I invite you to unpack what questioning would look like at different levels from Foundation (Prep) through to Grade 6. If you are a high school or secondary teacher unpack what Questioning looks like from Year 7 to 12.

In the next newsletter / blog I will get more into how good formative rubrics can be used as one tool in the process of supporting student learning as well as how teachers can unpack what a skill or understanding looks like for the purpose of formative assessment (or assessment for learning) – I will use Questioning as an example for this.

Further readings:

- 5 Tips To Help Students Arrive At Their Own Understandings
- Why Assessment for Learning might be wrong, and what to do about it
- Dylan Wiliam's defence of formative assessment
- The Assessment for Learning debate: does it matter who's right?
- One step beyond – assessing what we value