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Assessment and Processes to Develop Active Learning: Part II

In Part I I argued that we can't actually measure learning, the best we can do is infer learning from behaviour demonstrated over time. I pointed out that most of the measurement approaches I have seen used by teachers and schools are poor quality or are based on anecdotal observation that does not allow students to be CLEAR about what is being measured and thus not be responsible for their learning (they become passive rather than active learners).

If we are to develop students to be active learners then our systems and processes should be designed to encourage and empower a learner centred or learner driven approach. As pointed out at personalizelearning.com learning looks different at different stages from teacher centred to learner centred to learner driven. Active learners take responsibility for their own learners and are able to become highly skilled in what is now known as 21st century skills.

In this newsletter / blog I want to focus on using rubrics as one tool to assist in formative assessment and developing learner centred learning.

If we are to move students to a learner centred mindset then a rubric becomes a formative tool first and foremost (and can be used as a summative tool by the teacher). The purpose of the rubric is to distinguish a skill / concept or product so that it becomes distinct for the learner.

Distinct (adj): "recognizably different in nature from something else of a similar type"

So what makes something recognizably different from something else?

You need to be able to articulate what it looks like as well what it is NOT like.

Human beings do this all the time unconsciously as we grow up. It is part of how we come to understand language. *This is a chair. This is not a chair but a couch. This is the colour blue. This is not the colour blue – we call that red.*

What something looks like or NOT like also grows in depth as you develop your capacity and gain mastery to make something distinct. *This colour is not blue but sky blue, or aqua or royal blue. This is foot stool that can be used as a chair.*

Finally, to be able to make something distinct for someone you need to be able to communicate the nature of the distinction in language they would understand and is appropriate to their level of knowledge and understanding. You wouldn't start talking about colours as master artists would to children with little or no background knowledge of colour. So the language one would use is always appropriate to the people you are communicating with.

What this means in designing rubrics and formative assessment

Given the above discussion let's make formative rubrics and formative assessment distinct.

1. A strong formative rubric progressively unpacks and makes distinct what the skill, concept or product looks like to the learner

   I have found that teachers know anecdotally and from personal experience of interacting with learners what the different levels of a skill, concept or product look like – it is in many respects how they come up with a marking schema. In the rubric on questioning below I worked with teachers from Foundation through to year 3 to come up with a rubric that would capture – as concretely as possible – what they identify as the progressive stages of

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development in their learners ability to ask questions. This rubric is by no means complete but you can quickly see that the statements are all concrete aspects that one can hear or see happening as learning is occurring.

Aspects of Questioning	Beginning	1	2	3	4	5
Relevancy Question or not Open or Closed Fat or Thin Ability to respond to questions Vocabulary	Can make comments with teacher prompting	Is able to form a question but sometimes may not be relevant Makes relevant comments with teacher prompting	Asks relevant questions Uses questions to get more information Makes relevant comments and concrete suggestions	Asks open-ended questions Uses prior knowledge in asking a new question	Uses vocabulary of topic Uses questions to clarify understanding	Asks fat questions Asks questions that expand the conversation

2. A rubric by itself is insufficient – it must be supported by discussions and examples which model the different levels

   A strong rubric is supported by examples which model the different levels and continue to make the skill, concept or product distinction. In the above rubric a teacher would need to define what an open (and closed) question is, what makes a comment or question relevant, what is a fat or thin question, how to ask questions that clarify understanding, etc. If the learners are producing a magazine then you would need to have a range of different magazines available and shown to the learners to discuss how the rubric relates to different aspects of the magazine. .

   In the process of identifying what, in reality, the skill – concept – product would look like or NOT look like the teachers would be articulating the possible approaches and strategies they would be using to progressively develop the learners.

   For example, some of the ways identified by the teachers I worked with on the above rubric were:

   - Encourage learner questions that begin with – who, what, when, where, why?
   - Highlight different and interesting questions asked by learners
   - Prompt questions – what do you want to know?
   - The learners only get to ask 2 questions in a session (so need to think about them)
   - 5 Whys
   - Use a Wonder-wall
   - Saying the information you have heard as forming next question
   - Explicit teaching of open ended questions
   - Reference the rubric in class as learners ask questions

3. A rubric is a tool to enable students to drive their learning and develop their capacity and mindsets such that they see learning as a progression towards mastery

   Notice how the rubric above is written in positive language applicable to the age group. Rubrics develop the mindset that learners think from. I am interested in developing learners to be meta-cognitive and intrinsically

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motivated not extrinsically motivated by marks. We want to develop a personal best culture, or in other words, a learning culture that encourages students to put in effort and "compete against themselves" to develop and grow.

As Jim Knight pointed out:

"The trouble with deep learning is that it messes with our identity. In their book, Difficult Conversations (Penguin, 1999), Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen define identity as "the story we tell ourselves about who we are and what the future holds for us" (p. 112). It's a lot to ask to change the story we tell ourselves about who we are. That kind of learning is often painful, and frankly, we'd usually rather avoid it."

The more we take away the conversations of good vs bad, better vs worse, and right vs wrong and focus on learners demonstrating their progress in a skill, concept or understanding the more we will build the growth mindsets that Carol Dweck and others identify as critical to developing life-long learners and performers.

The next two steps along the path of mastery are to co-construct rubrics with the learners and finally have the learners construct the rubrics themselves. These are demonstrations of the learners reflecting on what constitutes progression of skills and how they could demonstrate evidence of progression.

With regard to progressive formative assessment, the rubric can become a tool which the learners use to see how they are progressing and they can now self-assess and reflect more effectively. Teachers can use the rubric as part of learner observations. If the teachers have a class list with the specific skill statements across the page they can tick off each time they see a student demonstrate the skill. This approach stems from – we can only get an indication that learning has occurred if the behaviours are demonstrated over time.

For other interesting reading:

- 3 Statements That Describe Rigorous Assessment
- Assessing Our Way to Creative Thinking
- How Assessment Can Lead to Deeper Learning
- Frictionless Formative Assessment with Social Media
- The Right Questions, The Right Way
- How do you know if effective teaching is occurring in your school?
- Formative assessment strategies for success
- 5 Out-Of-The Box Assessment Strategies Every Teacher Should Know
- More Progressive Ways to Measure Deeper Levels of Learning
- 18 Ways to use Rubrics in Education

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