‘Teaching to the test’ – does it help or hinder learning?

If ‘teaching to the test’ merely means having students complete numerous practice tests in an attempt to prepare for national testing, it narrows the curriculum (Mills 2008) and is clearly not an engaging activity for many. But suppose that it means preparing students for a wide repertoire of activities that value and judge their progress in learning. This can be achieved by making sure there are opportunities for students to work alone, as well as together, and to complete tasks within a tight time frame as well as at their own pace. It also means that the types of items that occur in tests are also woven into daily activities, even as games. In this way, two purposes for assessment – formative and summative – can be met.

Like learning and teaching, assessment is not a singular thing, suggests Earl (2003). Purpose is everything, she says, and the purpose of assessment is very clear: high-level learning for all students. Research demonstrates that assessment for learning – formative assessment – is a powerful lever for improving student achievement. When teachers involve students as partners in the assessment process, it can help students build a strong sense of self-efficacy and develop skills of judgement. Students can collaborate with teachers in creating assessment tasks like those they will encounter later on. Assessment then becomes far more than merely a one-time event attached to the end of a teaching program. (Stiggins 2009).

These findings are supported by others (e.g. Holmes-Smith 2005) who suggest that using tests like NAPLAN as diagnostic tools – for formative, as well as summative assessment – can raise learning outcomes. As Gardner, Holmes and Leitch (2009) suggest, there is no reason why examinations and tests should not be used formatively. How teachers and students use the feedback is the key. The UK government abolished national tests (SATS) for 14-year-olds in October 2008, following marking bungles which added to the stress that students and teachers were already experiencing, and is now piloting ‘single-level tests’ whereby students enter the test when their teachers think they are ready (Curtis 2008). Some critics argue that the problem with SATS was not the assessment of students as such, but the ‘high-stakes’ nature of testing and examinations, with the consequent labelling of students, discrediting of teachers and threatened closure of schools (Mortimore 2008).

In a major study, Hattie (2008) found that improving student-teacher interaction is the key to success in school. This is because learners create learning, and teachers create the conditions in which students learn. But Wiliam (2006) says that while an effective teacher is one whose students learn more, what students know when they leave school will be less important than what they learn later.

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**Assessment – what works**

- Regular classroom testing and the use of results to adjust teaching and learning, rather than for competitive grading
- Clear feedback between teacher and students, which may be oral or written
- Active involvement of all students
- Careful attention to students’ motivation and help in building their self-belief
- Self or peer-assessment by students, discussion in groups and dialogue between teacher and students

**Assessment – what doesn’t work**

- Tests that encourage rote and superficial learning
- Over-emphasis on the giving of marks and grades at the expense of useful advice to learners
- Competitive teaching approaches that de-motivate some students
- Feedback, testing and record-keeping that serve a managerial function rather than a learning one

Source: Black & Wiliam (1998)
Using formative assessment becomes particularly important given the new learning skills needed in the 21st century: skills such as team working, independent enquiry, self-management, reflective learning, effective participation and creative thinking (Gardner, Holmes & Leitch 2009). As well, with increasing use of digital technologies schools are grappling with the issue of how they can reliably recognise and assess the new skills required for and developed using new tools.

But the basics of literacy and numeracy remain important for all students, and some are clearly not achieving as well as we would like. They need a wide range of opportunities to learn and practice these skills. This happens when teachers know their students, collect data to monitor progress, give feedback and prepare them for all assessment possibilities. Some of these are individual tests.

Bibliography


Mortimore, P. 2008, ‘Scrapping Sats is a rash mistake’, The Guardian, 4 November. Available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/nov/04/sats-secondaryschools


To Improve classroom practice for peer- and self-assessment, teachers must:

• ensure the criteria for evaluating learning achievements are transparent
• teach students that habits and skills of collaboration have intrinsic value
• encourage students to keep in mind the aims of their work and to assess their own progress to meet these aims, so that they guide their own work and become independent learners

Source: Black et al. (2004)

Five key strategies for formative assessment

• clarifying and understanding learning intentions and criteria for success
• engineering effective classroom discussions, questions and tasks that elicit evidence of learning
• providing feedback that moves learners forward
• activating students as instructional resources for each other
• activating students as owners of their own learning


Strategies for useful feedback:

• written tasks, alongside oral questioning, should encourage students to develop and show understanding
• comments should identify what has been done well and what still needs improvement
• opportunities for students to follow up comments should be planned as part of the overall learning process

Source: Black et al. (2004)

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