Q & A with Lorna Earl

What does good assessment for learning practice look like in the classroom?

Assessment for learning in the classroom can take many forms. The most important feature is that it is seamless with teaching and learning and constantly informing the teaching and learning process. Assessment for learning is not something that happens outside the rest of classroom practice. It is integral to the process. When teachers are using assessment for learning, they are constantly thinking about the substance of the teaching and collecting information in as many ways as they can about how each student is understanding and processing the ideas. This evidence gives the teacher and the student insights into what to do next to structure the learning for each student.

What are the barriers to shifting the balance among assessment purposes so that more emphasis is placed on assessment as learning rather than assessment of learning?

Shifting the balance to assessment as learning is a shift in mindset as well as changes in how teachers teach and engage their students in their own learning. Assessment as learning is based on the conviction that students are capable of becoming adaptable, flexible, and independent in their learning, their thinking and their decision-making. It puts the student at the heart of any learning experience, and changes the teachers’ role to designing instruction and assessment that allows all students to think about and monitor their own learning. The ultimate aim is having deep and productive learning for each student. This shift in purpose and mindset also requires that teachers learn new skills and new ways of communicating with students and with their parents about what the teaching learning and assessment processes are intended to achieve.
When teachers are engaged in assessment as learning they are giving students the tools to undertake their own learning wisely and well. To become independent learners, students must develop sophisticated combinations of skills, attitudes, and dispositions. Teachers spend less time ‘telling students’ and more time modelling the skills of self-assessment, guiding students in setting goals, providing exemplars and models of good practice and quality work that reflect curriculum outcomes, working with students to develop clear criteria of good practice, guiding students in developing internal feedback or self-monitoring mechanisms to validate and question their own thinking, providing safe and challenging opportunities for students to practise, and monitoring students’ meta-cognitive processes as well as their learning.

Even with teachers who are highly skilled in supporting assessment as learning, students (and their parents) may be reluctant to take on this awesome responsibility of being learners. Students (both those who have been successful – in a system that rewards safe answers - and those who are accustomed to failure) are often unwilling to confront challenges and take the risks associated with making their thinking visible. So, another challenge for teachers is to create environments in which students can become confident, competent self-assessors. By providing emotional security and genuine opportunities for involvement, independence, and responsibility, students come to understand that failure is all right. The trick is that failure holds the seeds of later success.

**Is this type of assessment being embedded more holistically in teaching and learning practice?**

Frankly, I am disappointed in how slowly the profession is taking up the ideas of assessment as learning. Assessment as learning has the potential to be the lever for shifting schools into preparing students for the 21st century. It has become so clear that learning is not a luxury to be reserved only for the elite of the culture but a necessity for all young people in the society. Schools, once the instrument of sorting and selecting young people into those who needed more formal learning time from those who did not, should be places where learning is the imperative – for all. It surprises me that many educators still believe that their job is to sort. In my view, we should be long past a time when we were satisfied with keeping the talented 20 per cent and tossing the rest. Schools have to change to accommodate the diversity that comes with serving all students.

How can assessment as learning contribute to this shift? Very simply, assessment as learning is the meta-cognitive process. We have learned a great deal in recent years about how learning happens and what we can do as teachers to promote efficient and effective learning. The work by John Bransford and his colleagues for the National Research Council in the US ‘How People Learn’ makes one thing very clear – meta-cognition, being able to take control of your own learning by defining learning goals and monitoring your own progress in achieving them, is a key element in deep learning. Historically, few of us were taught to be meta-cognitive. Assessment as learning means helping students become meta-cognitive by teaching them and by giving them opportunities to practise – to establish the habits of meta-cognitive thinking that will make them proficient and efficient life-long learners.
‘Teaching to the test’ is a debated issue both here and overseas. What do you believe are the key issues?

When large scale state or provincial or national assessments are focused on testing the curriculum, they are designed to ensure that the whole curriculum is covered and that students are achieving the expected level of proficiency. The best large scale assessments do this in a way that educators see the curriculum as the test (or vice-versa). Teaching to the test means teaching the curriculum, all of it, to all kids. The problem arises when the test only covers a limited (and predictable) segment of the curriculum and teaching to it narrows the range of what is taught and actually provides an inaccurate or misleading picture of the learning that is happening.

I would be really happy if teachers focused their energy on teaching the curriculum to their students, rather than on trying to guess about what the government will focus on this year. Our job is teaching and learning. When that is done well, the test will take care of itself. Student learning is the goal. Raising scores, without actually enhancing learning, is a false and hollow outcome.

Governments are focused on outputs – increased performance measured by standardised testing. How can summative assessment be better used for diagnostic purposes?

I always find it curious that we expect one tool to do a multitude of things. Large-scale assessment has its purposes. For the most part they provide gross measures of performance. Because they cover the whole curriculum, they contain relatively few items in any area. These items can raise some flags about areas for attention but they are not likely to provide the kind of detail that is necessary for in-depth diagnosis of students’ learning in any area. This kind of diagnosis requires the serious attention of teachers working with individual students, sometimes over time, as part of their ongoing teaching and learning processes in class.

Instead of trying to make these standardised instruments into workable tools for diagnostic purposes, educators should be using a full range of assessment approaches to gather more and better evidence that is targeted on understanding their students’ learning conceptions, misconceptions, gaps and cognitive connections, as a starting point for creating tailored and differentiated learning experiences for them.

How can effective teachers use formative assessment strategies to prepare students for standardised testing?

The purpose of formative assessment is learning. Assessment for learning. When assessment for learning gets appropriated as a preparation for standardised testing, it becomes something else and its value for learning for the students involved gets subverted. In my view, it is more important for teachers to use formative assessment to enhance student learning. Then their performance on standardised tests should reflect this learning. Students might need some preparation to write standardised tests, but formative assessment is not the way to do it.
You state that fostering students’ ability to direct and redirect themselves must be a major goal of education. How can teachers transfer the responsibility of evaluating their work to students?

Students need to be taught, have support and feedback and be given lots of time to practise before they establish the habits associated with assessment as learning. As Malcolm Gladwell says in ‘Outliers’ it takes 10,000 hours to become expert at anything. Teachers cannot ‘tell’ students to take responsibility. They have to show them, guide them, teach them, help them, remind them and applaud them through the many experiences that will ultimately provide them with the depth of experience that they need.

What recommendations would you make about assessing ‘thinking processes’ in terms of assessment of, for and as learning?

Many researchers and theorists are studying assessment of thinking. The research is important but I think assessing thinking is an even more important issue of practice. In fact, assessment as learning is reflecting on your own learning and assessing the quality of your own thinking. It is the end goal that we hope to achieve – young people who have developed and honed the habits of metacognition so that they are able to regularly assess their own thinking, in the process of learning and who do this automatically, not just as an exercise in school. In my view, assessing thinking should become a routine, valued and challenging part of every class activity, designed to scaffold the students’ learning. For teachers, this means teaching their students how to reflect on their thinking and self-assess; modelling metacognition by making their own processes of standing outside their thinking visible; and helping students see how they can examine their own ideas and thinking processes, as a way of sharpening and refining their understanding. Students also need lots of opportunities to practise, with direct and descriptive feedback to provide them with alternative ways of thinking.

What are the new frontiers in assessment practice – at all levels of the system?

I’m not sure that we need new frontiers. Instead, I think we should concentrate on getting assessment for and assessment as learning incorporated into routine practice. We know so much about how learning happens that is not evident in most classroom practice. And, assessment is the most powerful tool that we have available to provide students with images of what success looks like, give them chances to show the status of their learning, and use feedback to guide them. Unfortunately, we have not yet accepted that we actually have the tools as professionals to fundamentally shift schools away from being sorting institutions to being institutions for learning for all. When assessment is used to unpick what teachers and students need to do next, progress in learning can move faster and be more rewarding.

I worry that, as education professionals, we are too concerned with the consequences of large-scale assessment done by outside agencies and not concerned enough about the consequences of the assessment that goes on every day in classrooms. The power to change student learning is in our hands. The challenge is to make the promise real by fundamentally changing the nature of teaching, assessment and learning to emphasise the way teaching and assessment, taken together, can enhance learning for all students.