*Improving assessment pedagogy* is the final in a series of professional development experiences on **Assessment for learning.** It is based on two readings written by Rick Stiggins, and Black & William. *Improving assessment pedagogy* provides a snapshot of these readings and some questions to consider.

The full readings are available at the given website.

##### References

Black, P. & William, D. 1998, “Inside the Black Box”, *Phi Delta Kappan*. 80(2), 139–148: <[www.kappanmagazine.org/content/86/1/8.abstract](http://www.kappanmagazine.org/content/86/1/8.abstract)>.

Stiggins, R.J. 2002, “Assessment Crisis! The absence of assessment *FOR* learning”, Phi Delta Kappan. 83(10), 758–765: <<http://electronicportfolios.org/afl/Stiggins-AssessmentCrisis.pdf>>.

For educators to successfully incorporate *assessment* ***for*** *learning* into classroom practice they need to reflect on their teaching philosophy, their assessment pedagogy and the alignment between the two.

Teachers must first examine their **beliefs** about learning and learners.

* *Assessment* ***for*** *learning* is based on the premise that all students are capable of achieving and have unlimited learning potential. With the right information and sufficient motivation all students can succeed in school. This contrasts with beliefs about fixed intelligence quotient (IQ) limiting learning capacity of students to varying degrees which has governed teaching pedagogy for many years.
* Secondly, the premise that learning is the transmission of knowledge must be challenged as active construction of knowledge is pivotal to the *assessment* ***for*** *learning* model. The transmission model places the teacher in control of learning whereas active construction of meaning places the student in control of learning. For students to take control of learning, they must have information about the learning on which to make informed decisions.
* Finally, teachers need to believe that their assessment pedagogy impacts upon learners and moulds learners’ views of themselves.

Students’ self-esteem plays a large role in motivating them to do well. Students who consistently receive negative feedback from assessment rarely look forward to their next assessment experience. This in turn makes them less prepared for the assessment thus increasing the likelihood that they will not do well again and so the cycle continues. Students who consistently succeed in assessment have a different cycle. Their high expectations motivate them to do well next time and so they prepare for the experience, increasing their likelihood of success. The teacher who is unaware of this impact and puts students through more of the same assessment experiences reinforces this self-belief; positive for one but overwhelmingly negative for another.

To transform this into a positive experience for all, a teacher needs to recognise that students are the ultimate users of assessment information and train them in its use. This requires a major shift in assessment pedagogy with a refocus on formative assessment and self-assessment to create conditions for assessment *for* learning. Black and William (1998) assert that self-assessment has been successfully used with students as young as five and needs to be used more extensively to promote learning. They identify three essential elements for assessment *for* learning:

* recognition of the desired goal
* evidence about present position
* some understanding of how to close the gap between the two.

Each of these elements, though, may present problems for teachers.

**Recognition of the desired goal** is difficult to achieve as many students have no understanding of what their learning is meant to attain but mindlessly accept it as random sequences of lessons. This is problematic, as for students to actively learn and accurately self-assess, they must understand the goal they are trying to attain. To overcome this, teachers must carefully select each assessment, including homework, for its contribution to the overall learning target and make this explicit to students.

**Evidence about present position** accumulates when assessment instruments build in time for student reflection and the opportunity for students to show what they know. This is often hampered by structured questioning techniques used by teachers which give little time for deep thought. In their quest to maintain lesson momentum and students on task, teachers often give less than a minute for response. Less than a minute leaves no time for more than surface response, so students either learn to guess what the teacher wants to hear, give the first response they think of or offer no response at all rather than risk deep thought. This creates a barrier to assessment *for* learning as neither teacher nor student really has a clear understanding of what the student knows. As a solution to this, teachers might build in independent written reflection or oral paired reflection on a given question and then generate a few responses to investigate as a class. [[1]](#footnote-1)The dialogue between pupils and teacher should be thoughtful, reflective, focused to evoke and explore understanding, and conducted so that all pupils have an opportunity to think and to express their ideas.

A further barrier to evidence about present position and to **understanding of how to close the gap** between present position and desired goals is that they both hinge upon quality feedback. In this, our system is lacking for two reasons. First, good feedback relies upon quality questions. Black and William (1998) remind us that good questions are hard to generate and therefore should be shared and critiqued amongst staff and other academics before they are used with students.

The second problem is that preoccupation with summative and high-stakes assessment for reporting purposes limits student access to timely, descriptive feedback. [[2]](#footnote-2)Feedback has been shown to improve learning when it gives each pupil specific guidance on strengths and weaknesses, preferably without any overall marks. Thus the way in which test results are reported to pupils so that they can identify their own strengths and weaknesses is critical. In order for them to learn from it, teachers need to provide descriptive feedback to students at a time when they still have time to confront their weaknesses and work with them not at the end of a unit of work when this information judges them.

Reform will not come easily even with philosophical and pedagogical change. Students who have become accustomed to taking little responsibility for their learning and students who have learned to avoid taking risks will initially refuse to step up to the task until they experience some success and feel some control over their learning. More time will also be required as students transform knowledge and teachers become involved in deeper discussions with students so teachers who already feel time-poor will feel the pressure until they begin to see real results.

Stiggins (2002) asserts:

healthy assessment environments … can meet the needs of all instructional decision makers, help students want to learn and feel able to learn, and thus support unprecedented increases in student achievement. But to achieve this goal we must put in place the mechanisms that will make healthy assessment possible. Creating those mechanisms will require that we begin to see assessment through new eyes. The well-being of our students depends on our willingness to do so.

With so much evidence accumulating that standardised testing isn’t improving outcomes and is actually harming some of our students, and that classroom assessment has the potential to produce real gains, it is time for teachers to take back control from external examiners and share assessment knowledge with the primary decision makers in learning, the students themselves.

### Key ideas

* *Assessment* ***for*** *learning* requires students to know the desired goal, their present position and how to bridge the gap between the two.
* *Assessment* ***for*** *learning* will not come easily due to current common beliefs and practices.
* Lack of clarity about the selected assessment and its contribution to learning goals, poor questioning techniques, lack of time and insufficient quality feedback all hamper assessment for learning.
* Assessment for learning requires teachers to believe that:
* all students have unlimited learning potential
* learning requires active construction of meaning
* assessment experiences affect students’ views of themselves.
* Pedagogical reform is flawed without the accompanying beliefs.

### Questions to consider:

1. Consider each belief in paragraph 2 of this article. How does each align with your own philosophy?
2. How do you presently share learning goals with students? Are there any actions you might take to make them clearer?
3. How do your students currently self-assess? Have you explicitly taught them how to self-assess? How successfully has it been? Is there more you might do to improve the use of self-assessment?
4. Consider your questioning techniques. How do you currently devise questions? Do you share questions with colleagues to gauge their quality? What is the proportion of open and closed questions in your classroom? Are the questions deep enough to enable students to show all they know? How do you incorporate wait time to ensure that all students have the opportunity to provide a considered response?
5. How and when do you provide feedback to students? Is it enough? How do they use that feedback? Could you increase the use and impact of feedback in your classroom? How?
1. Black, P. & William, D. 1998, Inside the Black Box [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Black,P. & William, D. (1998) Inside the Black Box. *Phi Delta Kappan*. 80(2), 139-148 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)