Welcome

Dear Colleagues,

If you had to express in words the feeling you get whenever you hear the word assessment, I think there would be a mixture of sweet and bitter expressions. This is due to the fact that our experience of assessment was always associated with tests, examinations, marks, grades and certification. Of course, these are assessments... but the purpose of these kinds of assessments is to make judgements about what is known and make us aware of what is not yet understood.

Assessment as the starting point

However, there is another very important dimension to Assessment. Assessment can also be done for the sake of learning. Learning happens whenever we build on what we already know and so we will be in a position to associate this new information to what was in our brain already. Learning happens if what we are being taught makes sense and we find it relevant. Do we still remember all the things we were taught from when we were young up till now? What have we forgotten? Why did we forget all these things? This should make us reflect on what we are teaching and how we are doing it. Besides, learning is active and social. We need to speak about what we are internalising, about the bridges forming in our brain between what we knew already and the new concepts. We need to think, reflect, reword, explain and explore further, maybe at first alone but then it needs to be done with others. To be able to do all this we need to be given the opportunity and time to prove to ourselves and others what has been learnt. In this way, misconceptions are revealed and the necessary amendments are done.... And learning happens better... in a more effective manner and certainly in a more efficient way. Giving these opportunities to provide evidence of the learning that is taking place, revealing what has been learnt and whatever gaps still lie in the learning pathway is assessment. Luckily, it does not stop there. Teaching and learning can start as soon as assessment discloses the gaps. The feedback given and the proof that this feedback has been taken up will demonstrate that learning has actually happened and the gap has been closed. Consequently, assessment is regarded as the starting point of all teaching and learning.

Here, we will be providing insight into assessment for learning strategies to help in the evaluation of current practices and consider how these strategies can create a nutritious environment in the classroom. While getting to know about these strategies is a good starting point, it is extremely important to try them out, reflect on what has worked and what could be improved in the classroom’s everyday life. Assessment for Learning strategies can be used all the time by all teachers, with all learners, no matter the age or ability.
UNDERSTANDING WHERE THE LEARNER STANDS IN HER/HIS LEARNING

Start from where the learner is. This is a key principle. Each and every learner has brought with her/him a baggage of information, ideas, concepts and fragmented knowledge. This cannot be ignored as it forms the starting point of new learning. Consequently, learners need to be given the opportunity to externalise this knowledge and ideas and express their experiences. Allowing them to talk about them is not enough. The teacher needs to be on the receiving end and listen carefully and seriously whether what the learners are saying is right or wrong. All this information collected by the teacher through observation and good listening will enhance the teacher’s opportunity to understand the needs of the learner and where learning needs to take place.

It is therefore beneficial to prepare a small activity to use before starting a new unit, topic or lesson, that will inform you about what the individual learners already know, what they do not know anything about, what misconceptions they have vis-à-vis the new concept you will be teaching. This strategy will throw light on what changes you will need to affect to your plan to cater for the individual needs exposed by the learners in your class.

The information elicited by this strategy will determine whether you can go on with your plan as it is, whether the teaching activity should develop into a more challenging one for a number of learners or whether the activity needs to have better scaffolding. Unless the plan is modified to cater for the learners’ needs and to focus on the next steps in instruction for the learner, this strategy would be useless.

For instance, a teacher wanted to teach her learners how to write instructions so she started off by asking them to write three command words on a laminated paper. The learners were asked to raise the laminated paper with the words so that at a glance she got an idea of what they knew. Another example was when a teacher wanted to teach the learners how to listen carefully and so asked the learners to listen to a short clip with various sounds. The learners were asked to list 5 of the sounds heard and to write them down on a paper. The teacher went round to observe what they were writing. In this way the teacher understood who the very good listeners were and who were those who needed more instructions and help while being taught this skill.

Techniques that can be used to implement this strategy

**Talk Partners:** In pairs learners discuss a statement or question posed by the teacher.

**Brainstorming:** Compiling a list of anything that comes to mind when thinking about a concept or fact.

**True or False:** Learners reflect on a statement, decide whether it is true or false and explain why.

**SOS:** Learners are asked for their opinion with regards to a given statement and how to support their view.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5: Learners are asked to write the first 5 words that come to their mind when they hear the lesson’s objective.

**Concept-Mapping:** Learners are asked to write the concept in the middle of a page and to link it with other words by means of labelled arrows.

**Entrance Card:** Learners write short points/phrases on all they know about a fact/concept and keep it on their desk so their teacher can see it.

**Ask Me:** Learners discuss in groups the statement/concept/fact the teacher wrote on the board and come up with three questions they would like to be answered during the lesson.

**Picture and a Note:** Learners draw the picture/diagram/sum that comes to their mind when they hear a fact/concept/statement/number and explain with a short note.
It all started with the Assessment for Learning training course for Assistant Heads in which Ms Mercieca was participating. Eventually, in agreement with Ms Maria Montebello, the then Head of School, the Primary (Assessment) HoD was invited to support the school. After developing a programme of work, the HoD held a number of sessions with the teachers during the ninety minute curriculum time to give an overview of AFL, to explain the support that would be provided, to plan demo lessons and carry them out and to discuss in a critical and constructive way the strategies observed during the demos. In order to strengthen the implementation of such an important pedagogy, the SMT felt the need and was assisted in the writing of an action plan to be included in the School Development Plan and teachers were consulted so they could choose the strategies which they were ready to implement. Following this consultation period and several negotiations, an action plan was drafted, discussed again with the teachers and SMT, amended according to the teacher’s needs and finally agreed upon.

This scholastic year, the focus is on strengthening the implementation of the chosen strategies. Consequently, more demos are being held as well as workshops to practise the chosen strategies during curriculum time. All teachers are exploring different ways of embedding this pedagogy into their existent practices. The teachers are investing energy in the creation of learning walls. These are the instructions learners need to scaffold their learning towards a particular target. In assessment for learning, such instructions are called Process Success Criteria. The pictures below show some examples. Success Criteria drive learning forward and aid differentiation.

Such adjustments necessitated that all the stakeholders share the same philosophy. Hence, the parents were informed and a meeting was held on the 6th December, 2012 in the school hall where the parents had the chance to observe a lesson so they could understand more what is their children’s experience in class when assessment for learning strategies are being used. The attendance, as the picture below can substantiate was very encouraging and this augurs well for the staff and the whole school community.

Over the last one and a half years that Safi Primary school has been working on the embedding of AFL in lessons, the teachers’ themselves and I can notice great differences and this can be confirmed by their comments and the learners’ comments too.

Pre AFL mindset comments
These are all nice things and I agree with the philosophy but it won’t work unless we have smaller classes and a reduced syllabus.

The mindset shift
I was very sceptical about the Success Criteria but they turned out to be very useful and helpful to me more than to the students cause now they can indicate where they got stuck and I know where to help.
I do not know how I used to teach without them. Now, the students are constructing them.
Students are asking for them. They really help them.

I want to conclude with a learner’s comment which is worth a million and speaks for itself, ‘With the learning walls, the learning is always around us’, a Year 6 student.

The school staff has gone through great lengths to be where it is today. All this could not have been possible without the constant support of the Assistant Head, Ms Mercieca, the former Head of School, Ms Montebello, as well as that of the present Head of School, Ms Cauchi.
THE ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING ROOM: FORUM AND NEWS

The Assessment for Learning Room on Fronter, which can be accessed through Educational Entities, offers the possibility to answer any queries or difficulties. It also provides the opportunity to share reflections and practices. Everybody is invited to make use of this opportunity and become part of this learning community.

The room provides access to other leading websites in AfL, presentations on every strategy, literature and videos. You are also invited to read the News in our room which is updated every time the AfL unit needs to communicate with the educators.

USING SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT FORMATIVELY

Examinations provide an insight into what has been achieved and learnt by learners. They explore what still needs to be learnt and where our individual learners have gaps that will hinder further progression in their learning pathway. It is therefore extremely important that we use this exercise to plan our future teaching with these learners. The mistakes done are indicative of where our learners need help. This help is the necessary feedback we have to give them. This feedback takes the form of simple instructions on how to go about closing this gap. Furthermore, the learners need to be given time to reflect and work upon this feedback and consequently provide evidence that learning has occurred and the gap has been closed. It is extremely beneficial for the learners to go through their examination paper, not just to see it but to work through the difficulties encountered and the mistakes done. Misconceptions might be revealed as well. Only when learners get the right feedback and prove that this feedback has been taken up, can this exercise be labelled formative.

Learning is what makes teaching a successful event. Therefore collecting evidence that proves that learning has taken place is important to be noted both by the teacher and by the learner.

Anyone who would like to share experiences or has any feedback to give us with regards to this newsletter is more than welcome to do so on joanne-rita.grima@ilearn.edu.mt.

A Final Note

References