‘The most important factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows and the job of the teacher is to ascertain this and to teach accordingly. Students’ conceptions are the result of sophisticated and creative attempts to make sense of their experiences.’ (Ausubel, 1968)

And here we meet again ....

Dear Colleagues,

By this time of the year we all got to know well the different individual students we are teaching and learnt their strengths and weaknesses. We have to admit that assessment has started from day one. Assessment is not simply the column adjacent to the examination column in the report sheet that is sent home twice yearly. Assessment informs our planning, our teaching and all our decisions. Assessment is what drives learning and so it has to drive teaching. But assessment is not the teacher’s business.... At least not exclusively! Since assessment is something personal, each learner needs to be part of the process. S/he needs to know why it is being done and what will be done with the findings. So, the purpose of every activity that provides information as to where the student stands on the learning continuum and what gaps s/he has needs to be well explained to the learners.
In our last issue we had tackled the importance of understanding where each learner stands in her/his learning prior to new teaching. This strategy will inform the teacher about the needs of each student and can then be catered for during the lesson. The next step then is to get our students focused on what will happen during the lesson.

This can be done by sharing the learning intention of the lesson. What is expected out of this lesson? What shall be learnt? Will it be just knowledge, or will it be a skill or is a change in behaviour expected? This strategy is effective and efficient if the Learning Intention is written down in a prominent place where all students can see it any time during the lesson. The teacher knows clearly what s/he intends to teach and so is extremely focused. However, this is not always so for students. Therefore, writing the Learning Intention down on the whiteboard or on a poster or on a cardboard or anywhere the teacher decides is best, will be significantly beneficial for the students.

Though teachers tend to share orally the objective of the lesson, writing it down is more powerful in that students can be reminded why they are doing a particular activity and towards what they are heading during that lesson. It is not enough to write the Learning Intention down and then forget about it till the end of the lesson. Individual students need to be asked ‘What are you learning today?’ ‘Why are we doing this activity?’ Such questions will keep them focused. One doesn’t need to ask these questions several times but when necessary and in order to get back the attention of those who start to show that they are losing track.

Learning Intentions need to be understood by all the students in class and so the vocabulary used to word them has to be well chosen. Moreover, it would help if the teacher explained the Learning Intention maybe with the use of some examples. The teacher will have to decide the right timing to share the Learning Intention. Sharing the Learning Intention does not mean disclosing the end result of the lesson.

### Examples of Learning Intentions

**Primary**
- I am learning to change fractions to decimals.
- I am learning to solve problems.
- I am learning to write an advert.
- I am learning to write instructions.
- I am learning to write good sentences.
- I am learning to understand a story.
- I am learning to speak about a topic.
- I am learning to work in a group.
- I am learning to change kilometres (Km) to metres (m).

**Secondary**
- I am learning to use co-ordinates.
- I am learning to do constructions.
- I am learning to understand poetry.
- I am learning to do the washing up.
- I am learning to do a slide show.
- I am learning to use expressions in my writings.
- I am learning to write a report.
It all started two years ago when St Margaret College, Kalkara Primary School, invited the Assessment for Learning Unit to support the school. The support started immediately and all the teachers showed great interest in the AFL strategies. The Head of School, Ms Mallia and the Assistant Head, Ms Saliba took on board these strategies and they provided all the teachers with The Questioning Flowers based on Bloom’s Cognitive Domain, WALT and WILF posters. All the teachers were given the resources so that they use them during their lessons. This year, Mr M. Tonna invested a lot in Learning Walls. These posters are all around the classroom. Mr Tonna said, “They are useful as learners have help constantly whenever they want. Each time they get stuck they look around them and they know what to do.”
A case study that was carried out in 2012/2013 in one of the local colleges provides unique insights into the learners’ perspectives and experiences of learning and assessment in the Maltese primary classroom. The analysis of the focus group data which was gathered from a sample of Year 4 students from each primary school demonstrated that the learners’ experiences in the classrooms could be defined as manifesting some areas of ‘A\L philosophy and practices’ (Leitch et al., 2006) whereas some others incorporated A\L-like tools’ in a traditional teacher-led environment. These findings were partly observed in the study entitled ‘Consulting Pupils on their Assessment of their Learning’ (Leitch et al., 2007) where most pupils conceived assessment as central to their classroom learning experiences with assessment principles being consistently and genuinely embedded in lessons. This case study is also in tune with James et al.’s (2006) findings where only a small percentage of the lessons observed in their ‘Learning How To Learn’ (LHTL) study were characterised by what they referred to as the ‘spirit of A\L’ at the heart of which is the promotion of learner autonomy.

The A\L-related areas that emerged from the student focus group data were the following: learning goals, independent learning, classroom environment, quality feedback, effective questioning, peer-assessment and self-assessment. Learners were mainly concerned with what helped their learning in the A\L classroom setting. The learners felt most involved in their learning when the teacher shared with them the learning intention, when the teacher made sure everyone had grasped the concept and when they reviewed what they had learnt at the end of the lesson.

- When the teacher shares with us the learning intention of the lesson we feel that we learn better as we know from the beginning what we are going to learn. (Pupil from School B)
- The teacher tries to explain the lesson in many different ways so that all the children in our class can understand the lesson. (Pupil from School D)
- After almost every lesson the teacher revises what was done during the lesson and this helps us remember the things we have learnt. (Pupil from School A)

Some learners also felt in charge of their learning when they were motivated and could do the classwork and homework on their own without much help from the teacher and from parents:

- During the classwork and homework I usually do not need any support from the teacher or from my parents. I think that this is because the teacher explains the lesson very well. (Pupil from School A)

The classroom environment was also considered by the majority of learners instrumental in promoting participation and engagement in their learning: ‘The teacher gives us time to discuss’ (Pupil from School E), ‘The teacher listens to us’ (Pupil from School D), ‘We are not afraid to do a mistake as the teacher tells us that we learn from each other’s mistakes’ (Pupil from School B). Learners considered a risk-taking culture and a commitment to learning for all as crucial in influencing their participation and engagement in their learning.
Feedback was another area identified by the focus group data as vital in establishing a positive experience of assessment and learning in the classroom. The pupils pointed out that they felt involved in their learning and assessment when the teacher went round the classroom during the classwork and gave them oral feedback, when the teacher told them immediately how they were faring and what they needed to do to improve and when they got oral and written comments of what was good about their work. The learners pointed out that they warmed to comments on what they needed to do to improve their work but found comments like ‘very good’, ‘good’ or ‘quite good’ inadequate and unclear, lacking details.

The feedback that the teacher gives us during the classwork really helps us ... the comments help us know where we are and what we can do to improve our work. (Pupil from School D)

Additionally, contrary to Black’s (2001) findings, all learners in this case study indicated that they preferred a mark and a comment rather than a comment or a mark by itself. It could be that learners, instead of being given the possibility to learn to associate feedback with new learning, were taught to associate feedback with either achievement or failure and so a mark is just a continuation of what they are used to.

The questioning strategies used in the classroom also emerged as a contributor or otherwise to the integrity of their assessment and learning. Some learners mentioned that some teachers still used the hands-up approach when asking questions, which Wiliam (2010) considers the most damaging habit in the classroom. Learners also indicated that teachers used strategies such as the ‘lollipop sticks with students’ names’, ‘cards with students’ names’ and the use of the class attendance during questioning.

Our teacher uses the lollipop sticks when she asks questions .... [L]ike this everybody gets a chance to answer questions. (Pupil from School C)

The final area that emerged from this research was the activation of students as owners of their learning and instructional resources of one another. Studies by Black et al., (2003) and Leahy et al., (2005) demonstrate that the effective implementation of these strategies can lead to marked improvements in student learning. Indeed, learners in this study identified skills that can help them become more fully participants in the learning and assessment process, such as working in groups: ‘I prefer working in groups as when I’m in a group I get support from my friends’ (Pupil from School B) but also considered that they may need more instruction on how to give feedback orally and in written form so that it would be helpful to ‘ourselves, our classmates and the teacher’ (Pupil from School A).

References

REMINDER

Now that examinations are round the corner, it is important to believe that this can be another formative exercise and that each learner should be given the possibility to review the corrected paper and work upon the necessary feedback. Looking at the paper and getting to know the mark will not drive the learner forward in her/his learning. It is the instructions that are given by the teacher vis-a-vis the mistakes done that will help her/him close this gap.

A Final Note

Teaching begins when learning begins. Creating the opportunity for the learner to provide evidence to show that s/he has learnt something new is great teaching. What opportunities are being provided in our classrooms?

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.