

Use of Formative Assessment in Classrooms

A Report on STU's Seminars on Assessment for Learning conducted by Dr Mary James (2-3 December 2002)



Dr Mary James is Reader in the Faculty of Education and Fellow of Lucy Cavendish College in Cambridge University, UK. Dr James directs a major project, entitled "Learning How To Learn – In Classrooms, Schools and Networks". This research project is part of a £25m initiative (the Teaching and Learning Research Programme), of which she is also the Deputy Director.

Assessment-led reform is now one of the most widely favoured strategies to promote higher standards of teaching, more powerful learning, and more credible forms of public accountability (Hargreaves et al, 2002).

The preposition "for" in the title of this series of Seminars is significant, which is intended to identify "the problem that much current practice emphasises assessment *of* learning rather than assessment *for* learning and misses the opportunities to use assessment to improve learning". STU's rationale for having these Seminars at this time may be stated simply – there is a need to get some insight into the research and debate in the UK about the role of formative assessment in the learning and teaching process. Formative assessment (as distinct from summative assessment) is conducted informally by teachers but, until such time when the research evidence was available, it has not been clear how formative assessment can promote classroom learning and how it can best be used to help children learn.

As a leading member of the Assessment Research Group in the UK, Dr Mary James of Cambridge University is very familiar with the research evidence. So she was invited by STU to conduct the two Seminars here in early December 2002.

■ A Sample of the The Main Points

Made in the Seminars

Assesment for Learning...

...is a process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go, and how best to get there.

(Assessment Reform Group, 2001)

Learning how to learn...

...is achieved when learners make sense of where they are in their learning, where they are going, and how to improve;

in other words, when they become autonomous learners, and engage in Assessment for Learning for themselves.

Substantial effects

About 50 studies, ranging over ages, subjects and countries, compared improvements in achievements for students in 'intervention' groups with students in 'control' groups. 'Assessment for learning' innovations typically produced effect sizes of between 0.4 and 0.7 – larger than those found for other educational innovations.

What does this mean?

An effect size of 0.4 would mean the average student would attain the level currently attained by the top 35%.

An effect size of 0.7 would improve performances of students in GCSE by between one and two grades (and possibly three grades for the lowest attainers).

An effect size of 0.7 would raise England from the middle of 41 countries in international league tables for mathematics, to being one of the top 5.

Practical strategies: feedback

- Comment-only marking
- Focused marking
- Explicit reference to criteria
- Sugestions on how to improve
 - 'Strategy cards' ideas for improvement
 - Not giving complete solutions
- Re-timing assessment
 - (eg, two-thirds-of-the-way-a-topic test)

What do teachers need to do?

- Seek and interpret evidence of existing learning and performance (especially through questioning)
- Provide feedback to help learners understand the strengths and weaknesses in their current performance, the standards aimed for, and how they might improve
- Provide opportunities for learners to improve their work
- Develop learners' own capacity to understand standards and to self-assess using criteria and exemplars
- These elements need to be *planned* as part of teaching

Implications for the Work of Teachers

in Classrooms

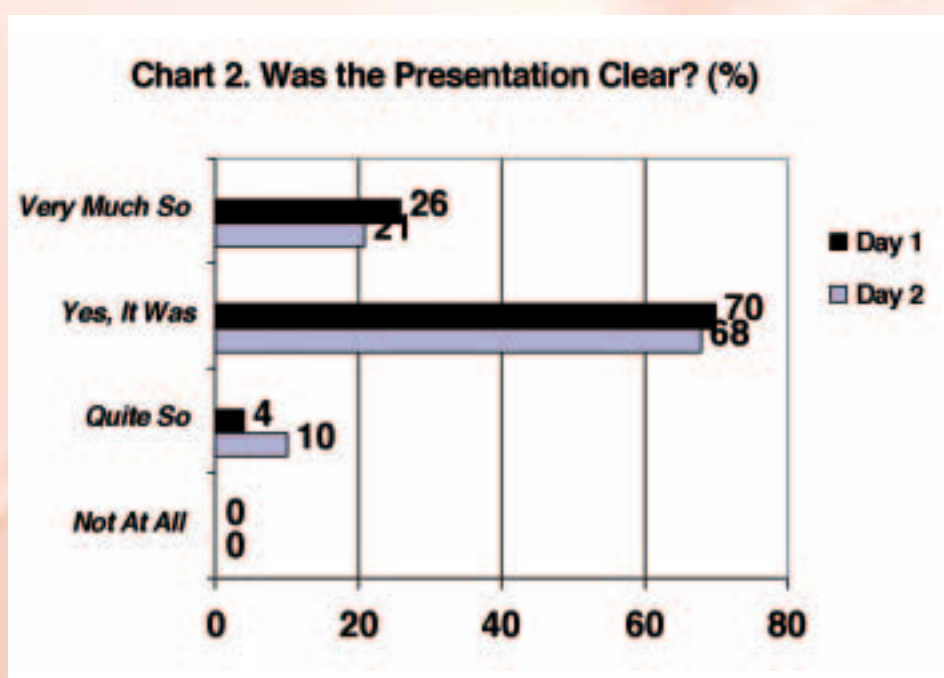
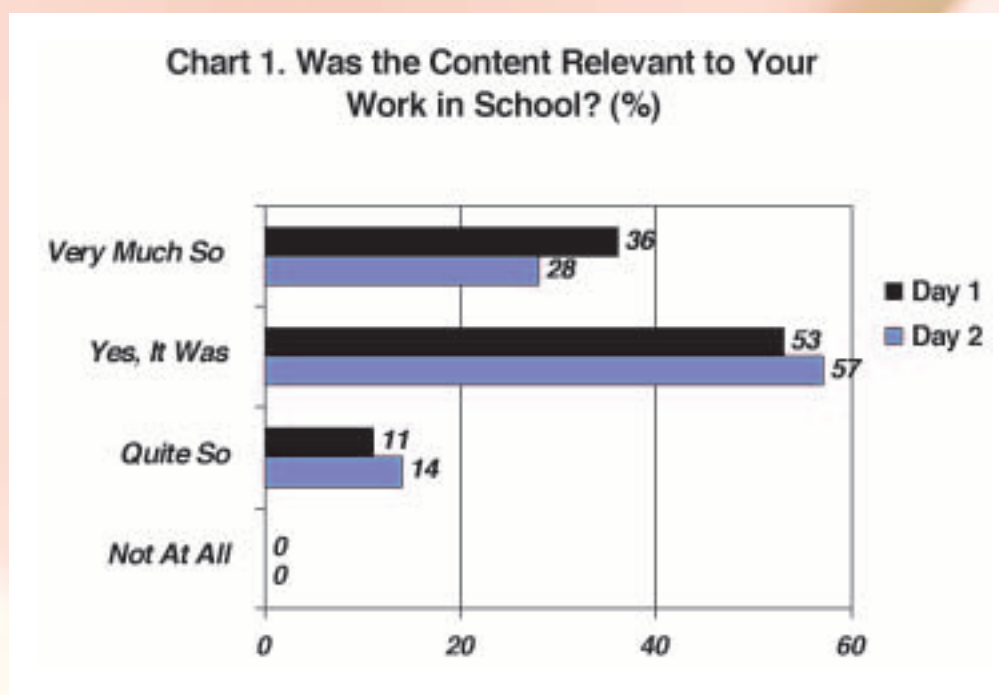
As explained by Dr James, the review [of research on assessment] emphasises what teachers in classrooms can do to avoid the negative impact of tests on motivation for learning. It also indicates the actions that can enhance motivation for learning. To accomplish these goals, teachers should:

do more of this ...	and do less of this ...
<p>Provide choice and help pupils to take responsibility for their learning.</p>	<p>Define the curriculum in terms of what is in the tests to the detriment of what is not tested.</p>
<p>Discuss with pupils the purpose of their learning and provide feedback that will help the learning process.</p>	<p>Give frequent drill and practice for test taking.</p>
<p>Encourage pupils to judge their work by how much they have learned and by the progress they have made.</p>	<p>Teach how to answer specific test questions.</p>
<p>Help pupils to understand the criteria by which their learning is assessed and to assess their own work.</p>	<p>Let pupils judge their work in terms of scores or grades.</p>
<p>Develop pupils' understanding of the goals of their work in terms of what they are learning; provide feedback to pupils in relation to these goals.</p>	<p>Allow test anxiety to impair some pupils' performance (particularly girls and lower performing pupils).</p>
<p>Give feedback that enables pupils to know the next steps and how to succeed in taking them.</p>	<p>Give feedback relating to pupils' capabilities, implying a fixed view of each pupil's potential.</p>
<p>Encourage pupils to value effort and a wide range of attainments.</p>	<p>Compare pupils' grades and allow pupils to compare grades, giving status on the basis of test achievement only.</p>
<p>Encourage collaboration among pupils and a positive view of each other's attainments.</p>	<p>Emphasise competition for marks or grades among pupils.</p>
<p>(Source: <i>Testing, Motivation and Learning</i>, 2002, p 8)</p>	

■ The Feedback:

How Well Were the Seminars Received?

At the end of each Seminar, participants were invited to provide feedback on each day's sessions. At the end of Day 1, 47 (or 96%) of the participants completed the feedback forms distributed, while on Day 2, 104 (or 86%) did. Participants on Day 1 (■) came largely from primary schools, while those on Day 2 (■) were mainly from secondary schools. There were also a number of officials from the Ministry of Education. These charts have been selected to reflect the evaluative views of both groups of participants.



Concluding Remarks

It is appropriate to conclude this brief report using Dr Mary James' own words. In her article that appeared in *The Curriculum Journal*, entitled "Measured Lives: The Rise

of Assessment as the Engine of Change in English Schools", Dr James raised two fundamental points about assessment in general:

On the one hand –

However superficially successful an assessment policy has been in raising performance on tests and examinations, is there a point at which the system becomes so stressful for students and teachers that it becomes counter-productive? There is evidence that England has reached this point; there is a crisis in teacher recruitment, despite the recent introduction of additional incentives..., and high numbers of experienced teachers are leaving the profession early....

On the other hand –

If lifelong learning in a rapidly changing knowledge society is an important goal, should more effort and resources be put into new modes of assessment that will support the development of the kinds of knowledge and skills that economic, social and family life in the twenty-first century will demand?