

Strategy: Discussion not monologue – talking with, not at, the learners

Introduction

One of the key ways in which you can develop formative assessment with your learners is to talk with them. The previous strategy involved listening in; this one asks you to think about having conversations with your learners. This is neither as simple nor as obvious as it sounds.

2. Discussion not monologue

- When do you talk to someone else? For example, your partner, your friends, your mum? Do you talk to them, or *with* them? Do they talk to you, or with you? What does listening to other people involve?

These aren't meant to be deep and meaningful questions – although they could be! Do conversations you have with your adult social group differ from those you have with young learners? We hope so! But what about you the teacher as turn-taker in a conversation? One aspect of formative assessment is that teacher and learner discuss together what learning is going on, and work out between them what the next steps are in the learning that the individual learner can do. This does not mean that all teaching has to stop while you have individual conversations with every child that you teach, but that this is a 'stolen time' opportunity, when the class are working on a task, giving you a chance for a one-to-one discussion.

Conversations between teacher and learner are not as simple as you might think! There are power relationships at play, and interpersonal dynamics too. As the Assessment Reform Group noted some years ago, '*Learners need information and guidance in order to plan the next steps in their learning. Teachers should: pinpoint the learner's strengths and advise on how to develop them...*' (Assessment Reform Group, 2002, p 4). This can be done by talking *with* learners. Listening to what they have to say is an important part of this formative assessment strategy. As we know:

One way of asking a question might produce no answer from the student, while a slightly different approach may elicit evidence of achievement. We can never be absolutely sure that we have exhausted all the possibilities, so that we can never be sure that the student does not know something, but some assessments will be better than others in this respect.

(William and Black, 1996, p 541)

So, in order to try to find out what the learners know and might not know, we talk *with* them, not to them.



Strategy in action

Mr Henrik teaches physics in a secondary school. Every few lessons he likes to set the learners on a practical task, and then walk round the classroom talking to them about what they are doing. But he is not just asking them about the work they are doing in today's lesson; he also wants to talk to them about how the work they are doing now fits with the scheme of work for the term.

Mr Henrik: *Hey, Sophie, you've got all the equipment set up I see.*

Sophie: *Yes, but I had a bit of trouble doing it!*

Mr Henrik: *Oh, why's that then?*

Sophie: *I couldn't get the switch to work.*

Mr Henrik: *Do you remember when we did light bulbs last term?*

Sophie: *Err, I think so.*

Mr Henrik: *Did you manage to get your lights to switch on and off?*

Sophie: *Yes, I remember now.*

Mr Henrik: *What did we say about the switch then?*

Sophie: *Oh I remember, the wires had not got to touch each other.*

Mr Henrik: *Have a look at your circuit board now.*

Sophie: *Oh, duh...*

This is a simple example of an AfL dialogue. This looks all very normal, but note two things.

- Firstly, Mr Henrik does not just tell Sophie that the wires are touching – although he could (and some teachers would argue he should, as this will save time) – but he talks her through the cumulative learning that has taken place over the course of a series of lessons on this topic.
- Secondly, what Mr Henrik is doing here is to establish what Sophie knows, and what connections she needs to make in order to be able to undertake the task in hand, building on her prior learning. He does this by helping her make a connection with prior learning, and therefore build her own conceptual framework of understanding.

It will depend on you, your learners, and your school policy, but AfL discussions of this nature (and this is a very simple one) can have a strong impact on learning.

A Spot of Theory

One of the early writers on formative assessment noted that 'The essential conditions for improvement are that the student comes to hold a concept of quality roughly similar to that held by the teacher...' (Sadler, 1989, p 121). But quality can be itself a problematic construct. By talking with Sophie, Mr Henrik is able to help her understand what she has to do, and to see how a 'quality' solution can be arrived at.

Strategy: Traffic lights – learners show you what they can/can't do

Introduction

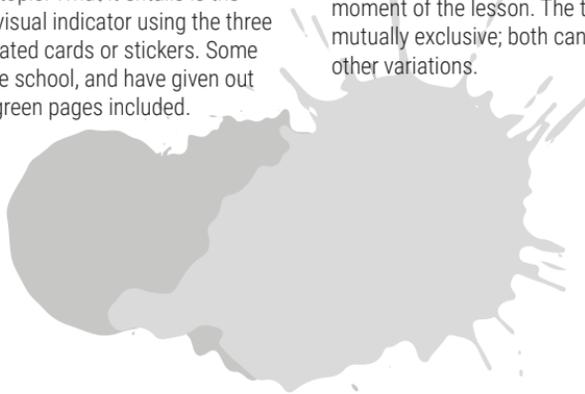
The American politician Donald Rumsfeld famously said, *'There are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know'*. For AfL to be successful, we need to help the learners towards knowing what they don't know. It is, of course, much harder to get them to think about what they don't know that they don't know, so let's start with thinking about the former!

3. Traffic lights

Traffic lights, also known in some contexts as the RAG rating (RAG = Red, Amber, Green), is a way of equipping your learners with a simple visual strategy for demonstrating to you in either an overt or an unobtrusive way whether or not they think they understand a topic. What it entails is the learners being equipped with some form of visual indicator using the three traffic light colours, for example small laminated cards or stickers. Some schools have adopted this system across the school, and have given out learning diaries which have red, amber and green pages included.

When a learner thinks they understand something, they display the green 'light'; when they are not quite sure, the amber; and when they know they don't understand, the red. This can be done in many ways. In some cases, the teacher asks the learners to simply hold up the appropriate colour to indicate where they think their understandings lie. This is, of course, a very public display, and some learners may be reluctant to demonstrate uncertainty at this level in front of their peers. In some schools – particularly primary – the learners are asked to close their eyes as they hold up the cards, so they can't see how others have responded. In order to address this, another way of using the traffic lights system is for the learners to simply have the red or amber card turned face-up during times when the teacher is moving around the classroom. This enables the teacher to intervene in more subtle ways in order to help the individual learners who require it.

Used regularly, the traffic lights can become an integral way of you being able to offer assistance in a timely fashion where it is required, and to undertake a quick visual scan of how understandings are going in the moment of the lesson. The two methods of using the cards are not mutually exclusive; both can be employed in the same classroom, as can other variations.



Strategy in action

Miss Wood teaches in a primary school. All of her learners have a notebook which she likes them to keep on their desk at all times to make notes and jottings as they think of them. She has printed and laminated a set of traffic light cards (about the size of a credit card) for each of the learners in her class. Today she is teaching a lesson on multiplication, and has explained how she wants the learners to do the sums she has set. Having explained an example on the board, she then asks each learner to hold up the card which best summarises what they think about their own understanding. Miss Wood notices that she has a large number of amber and red cards being held up, many more than green cards. She decides that she will work through another example on the board for all of the class. She does, and then repeats the request for a display of traffic lights. This time there is a much greater number of green cards, and so Miss Wood decides that she will concentrate her attention on the learners who displayed amber and red cards.

Miss Wood organises the learners who displayed red and amber cards to work at a table at the side of the classroom, while those who displayed green cards are set to work in the rest of the room. This enables Miss Wood to get on with further explanations and examples for this specific group of learners, while she can still keep an eye on those who believe they understand.

Doing this, Miss Wood feels, enables her to target her scaffolded support at the learners who are most in need at that moment, and allows her to maximise her precious time in an organised and efficient fashion.

A Spot of Theory

Bruner's notion of scaffolding (Wood et al, 1976) is important here as it describes how a teacher can support learning by offering support when it is needed. Importantly, Bruner also describes how the scaffolding of teacher interventions can be withdrawn as learning becomes more secure.

Strategy: If I had five more minutes – how would learners' work improve if they had just a little more time? (try it!)

Introduction

You will be very well used to working according to strict times and timeframes. In many schools, the passing of time is marked by bells or buzzers, and teachers and learners both know that this means the end of something, and the beginning of something else. But what would happen if you were to subvert this; obviously you probably can't change the times of the bells without causing major disruption, but what happens if you allow just a few more minutes for a task?

4. If I had five more minutes

This strategy can be used in all settings, but requires different tactics for its management depending on how the day is organised. In a primary school, with a single teacher in charge of the class for much of the day, it will be easier than in a secondary school, academy or college, where there are different demands and requirements. But there are a number of ways of achieving this.

One way of using this strategy addresses a common problem in schools, where we tell learners how they could do better at a piece of work that they've just done, but are unlikely to do again! Using our strategy, however, the learners finish their work as normal, have it marked and graded, and then handed back to them with the opportunity in class to spend five minutes (or whatever time is appropriate) addressing the issues

that the teacher has pointed out. The work is then handed in again, with improvements noted. This doesn't mean that you have to mark the entire piece again, simply the new material.

Another way of employing this strategy is to allow your learners to finish their work as usual, and then have some other form of activity, break-time, or learning encounter; then, next time the lesson comes round, begin by spending an extra five minutes giving attention to the piece of work again. This enables the learners to revisit and check through their work before finally completing it.

A third way of using this strategy in performance-based subjects, including (but not limited to) music and drama, allows the learners to finish and show their work, after which they are told they have an extra five minutes to just revisit the performance (or other work) with a view to tidying up any loose ends. Then a revised performance can take place, with – hopefully – the benefits of the extra time showing. In performance-based subjects it is useful to have an audio or video recording to refer back to in order to decide what might be useful. Another very important way to use it is to let learners think through and explain what/how/why they would do something differently, even if there is insufficient time to actually do it. This gets them thinking about the *process* of learning, rather than thinking they have to come up with another end product. This discussion (which links back to Strategy 1) helps you understand their thought process and creative ideas.



Strategy in action

What does *five more minutes* mean in the context of your subject? We are aware that this book will be read by many different teachers of a variety of subjects and age ranges, so, what does it mean for you?

What would five more minutes involve...

1. in written work?
2. across two lessons?
3. in practical lessons?
4. when you only see the learners for one lesson a week?
5. when you see the learners every day?
6. when you see the learners all day, every day?
7. when you finish early?
8. when you want them to have more time?
9. when you want the *quality* of the work to improve?
10. when you want the *quantity* of the work to increase?

Think about these questions, and try to come up with ways in which you can implement this strategy with your class.

Why is it a formative assessment strategy? The answer to this question is that by giving formative feedback, either spoken or written, you are helping the learners take that important next step in what they will be doing. This is an *immediate* next step, and is built on what they are doing in the here and now. This involves the learners in *metacognition*, in other words, in thinking about their own thinking.



"What would I improve if I had five more minutes?"

A Spot of Theory

Harlen and James (1997, p 206) note that: 'When something is learned with understanding (deep learning, 'real' learning) it is actively understood and internalised by the learner. It makes sense in terms of a learner's experience of the world...'

Learning with understanding – deep learning – is a useful notion for acquisition and employment in the classroom.

Strategy: Why questions – why are we learning this?

Introduction

Have you ever had the experience of a learner asking you, 'Why are we doing this?' If you have, you will know that learners do not always have the same overview of a teaching and learning programme, programme of study, or scheme of work in their heads as you do in yours! Answering such questions with, 'Because I said so', or, 'Because it's on the syllabus' may not be the most satisfactory answer for learners. This strategy turns the question around, and asks the learners what they think.

5. Why questions

When we begin a new topic, or move to a different area of teaching and learning, as educators we often begin this process by telling the learners both *what* they will be learning and doing, and *why* they will be learning and doing it. In this strategy we pick this up a little way into the teaching and learning programme, and ask the learners themselves to explain why they are doing a particular activity. 'Because we have to' is not acceptable as a suitable answer!

This strategy requires the learners to be able to make connections with their prior learning, and, depending on how aware they are of what is coming next, will also act as a stepping-stone to future work. The learners need to be able to take a step back from the immediacy of the lesson, and think about it in the context of a series of lessons, looking both forward and behind. This is not as common as you might think in terms of how we interact with our learners. It is another form of metacognition, asking learners to think about their own thinking.



Encouraging learners to ask 'why' questions

Strategy in action

The class in a secondary-school science lesson are learning about looking at things using a microscope. The teacher has prepared a series of slides for the learners to look at through the microscope and describe what they see. There has been much of what the teacher describes as 'faffing about' as the learners get to grips with using the microscopes and actually being able to see something down them! After a while, the teacher stops the class, and asks them, 'Why do you think we are doing this?' Here are some of the answers she gets.

- “ So we know how to use a microscope.
- “ Because I saw them using one on CSI last week.
- “ Because you said we are studying cells next.
- “ Because we can't see things this tiny without one.
- “ Because proper scientists use microscopes.
- “ Because it's on the exam.
- “ So we know it's not a telescope.

Here are some reflective questions for you to think about relating to the answers the teacher received:

- Which of these answers do you think the teacher should develop in her response?
- How important in developing learners is knowledge of what is to come?

- Which of these would you say is the 'best' answer? (This is subjective, and there is no right answer!)
- And which the 'worst'? (Ditto!)
- Are there any answers you might want to explore in much greater detail?

This is a formative assessment strategy because it asks the learners to think about what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how it fits with the sequence of activity that they are undertaking.

A Spot of Theory

In *Working Inside the Black Box*, [Black et al \(2004, p 11\)](#) note that: 'Many teachers do not plan and conduct classroom dialogue in ways that might help students to learn'. They recommend that talking with learners '...can become part of the interactive dynamic of the classroom and can provide an invaluable opportunity to extend students' thinking through immediate feedback on their work'.

If you only try one thing from this chapter, try this*

Checklist

Use this to keep a record of what worked well for you and what didn't.

A strategy that works with one class may not work so well with another. Keeping a checklist helps you to work out what factors or learner characteristics call for one approach rather than another. There's a line at the bottom for you to add your own most frequently used formative assessment strategy, if it's not already included in the list.

Strategy	Tried it with...	On...(date)	It worked	It didn't work	Worth trying again?
1. <u>Listening in*</u>					
2. Discussion, not monologue					
3. Traffic lights					
4. If I had five more minutes					
5. Why questions					
Your own strategy?					