I want to introduce you to a website that is designed to build professional knowledge and skill in formative assessment practices and to provide tools for teachers. The site is called Assessment for Learning. Assessment for Learning is also a term used to describe a systematic approach to formative assessment.

The website was commissioned by Curriculum Corporation’s Board of Directors. Board members include the Chief Executive Officers of all the government systems and the two non-government sectors, as well as parents and representatives of unions and the New Zealand Ministry. This far-sighted group of policy makers commissioned this project because they saw it as a means to build and support a strong assessment culture in all Australian schools – to build and support professional practice. So, the site belongs to all of you.

Gabrielle and Bruce have given us examples of tasks that are intertwined with curriculum and that are designed to develop deep knowledge and deep understanding. Clearly the tasks we have seen are as much about learning as they are about assessment. However, Gabrielle also made the point that assessment is ultimately about making inferences about student achievement on the basis of the evidence before the teacher assessor. No one could argue with this. But having made these inferences there is still a leg of the journey to be travelled. What do teachers and students do with the information that they have gained as a result of undertaking such tasks? What comes next?

Assessment for Learning practices and the website emphasise the completion of the learning cycle. Well-designed assessment promoting deep learning gives teachers the material or opportunity to make judgements about achievement and learning needs, leading in turn to feedback and teaching programs designed to meet the needs identified through the assessment process.

The website aims to close the gap between assessment and learning – and I use that order deliberately – to use the information from assessment to improve learning, and to support the use of a number of other strategies that we know from the research to be effective. As such the site also aims to close the gap between research-based evidence and classroom practice – to use what has been learnt from research into formative assessment to provide professional support and tools for teachers, who in turn can use this to inform and perhaps even transform practice.

What do we mean by formative assessment? Formative assessment refers to the frequent interactive assessments of student progress and understanding.

The United Kingdom Assessment Reform Group (2002) defined Assessment for Learning as:

… the 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.

This definition implies:
• a deliberate, planned and focused process;
• the involvement of both learners and teachers;
• a professional knowledge of assessment on the part of teachers (picking up on Gabrielle’s view about assessment being more than the stuff of a rainy Sunday afternoon); and,
• most importantly, an expectation that the information gained from this kind of assessment will directly inform the teaching and learning program.

What does the research say?

Black and Wiliam’s 1998 survey of the research literature on formative assessment, *Inside the Black Box*, asked the question, ‘Is there evidence that improving formative assessment raises standards?’ The survey found that in the research literature, typical effect sizes of formative assessment interventions were between 0.4 and 0.7. These effect sizes are larger than most of those found for educational interventions. An effect size of 0.4 would mean that the average pupil involved in an innovation would record the same achievement as a pupil in the top 35% of those not so involved.

A significant piece of research published since the website went live confirms the earlier research. A UNESCO study of 19 case studies in nine OECD countries incorporated:
• examination of policy frameworks
• visits to exemplary schools
• interviews
• classroom observations
• literature reviews.

It found that ‘... formative assessment is one of the most effective strategies for promoting high student performance.’ It also confirmed Black and Wiliam’s finding that it is important for improving the equity of student outcomes, for closing the gap between low achievers and the rest of their cohort (for diminishing the assessment gap tail). It was also important for developing students’ ‘learning to learn’ skills.

What does the research show about current practice?

Both Black and Wiliam’s studies and the more recent OECD study show that formative assessment is used haphazardly at all levels of the teaching and learning interaction. From the simple level of asking questions of students, to the complex level of using information from system-wide tests, or the in-between level of using what is learnt from powerful assessment tasks such as those outlined by Gabrielle and Bruce, at all these levels we are not so good at taking what is learnt and feeding it back into the learning process in a systematic way.

Seven fundamental strategies arise from the research about how to make formative assessment more systematic and powerful in order to improve student learning outcomes and close the achievement gap. Many of these strategies resonate with the beliefs and values of the education profession, but their crystallisation into a systematic set of strategies provides a valuable framework on which to base policy and practice.

These seven strategies include:
• embedding assessment in student learning;
• providing effective feedback on the qualities of the work with advice about how to improve;
• the use of strategic questioning;
• student self-assessment which helps students to understand and internalise the task and develops ‘learning how to learn’ skills;
• sharing learning intentions and assessment criteria with students who
should know and recognise the standards;
• making formative use of summative assessments both the kind that it is done in classrooms and at a system level (Jocelyn and Mary are going to talk about this); and
• planning and adjusting teaching programs on the basis of what is learnt from assessments.

Each one of these strategies has a body of knowledge arising from classroom research about what makes for effective practice. As we refine what are effective strategies for formative assessment we are also closing the gap between effective pedagogy, learning and assessment. All of these seven strategies are built into the structure and all elements of the website.

If Assessment for Learning as a systematic set of practices has such powerful potential for improving student learning and closing the achievement gap, then teachers and policy makers should be very interested in how best to support and build skill in their use. At the grass roots level there has been great interest in being involved in the project and in learning how to make use of the website. At the policy level, the site itself shows policy makers’ recognition of the need to build and support practice in this area. The UNESCO study identifies a number of other policy levers that are effective and argues the need for tools, such as the website, and other top-down policy activity.

So let’s look at the Assessment for Learning project and the website. As mentioned earlier, the project was funded by the Curriculum Corporation Board to support all Australian teachers. It is a major project having involved:
• 25 writers
• 100 schools in trialling the tasks
• more than 150 teachers in trialling
• 130 teachers in moderation of work samples
• production of 32 assessment tasks
• five professional development modules
• a reference group of State and Territory officers providing advice throughout the project to ensure that approach and substance met the needs of their jurisdictions
• two ‘train the trainer’ sessions delivered in Brisbane and Adelaide with attendees from every State and Territory and all jurisdictions.

The website is a professional development resource incorporating assessment tasks with rubrics and suggested follow-up teaching and learning activities, work samples and professional development modules. The assessment tasks are a framework to illustrate the strategies which have been identified in the research as effective. The emphasis is on modelling rather than on provision of definitive ‘carved-in-stone’ assessment tasks.


The website is not the end of the story. The Curriculum Corporation Board has identified the need to provide further tools and professional support. A new project is underway which will develop three case study DVD/videos of exemplary classroom practice in relation to three of the key Assessment for Learning strategies: strategic questioning; effective feedback; and student self-assessment. In addition to classroom practice, the video will show teachers interviewed about their use of the strategies, their difficulties, and how they have overcome them. The first module is under way with two others to follow depending on the results of the evaluation of the first.
References

Assessment Reform Group (1999), Assessment for learning: beyond the black box. University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education