

Meaningful Assessment and Quality Collaboration: the Challenges and the Opportunities



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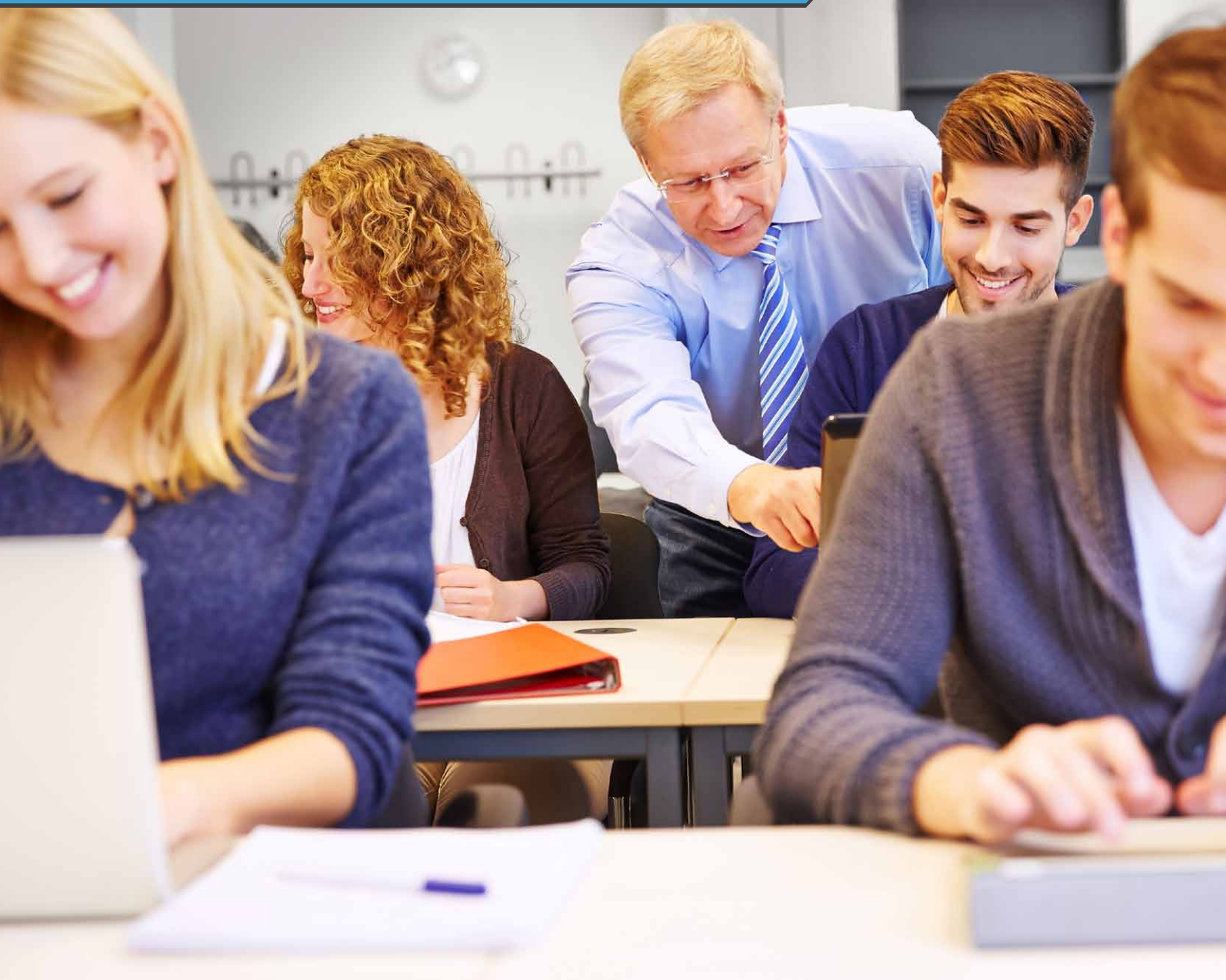
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Executive Summary



Any skilled educator would agree that high-quality learning experiences emanate from a positive, stimulating, interactive environment, thoughtfully designed to meet the needs of every student. Most are fully aware that regular, meaningful feedback should be embedded into their practice and that students will benefit from working within a collaborative classroom. Nonetheless, demands on teacher time, increasing class sizes, external examinations and a lack of suitable tools can interfere with the worthiest of intentions.

Now technology has become a significant part of the modern educational landscape, many teachers are eager to incorporate high-quality digital experiences into everyday teaching, learning and assessment. Yet, while this technology brings a host of valuable opportunities and can result in excellent outcomes, teachers will know that it is not without its challenges.

This paper will outline the reasons why collaborative learning and assessment have become more important than ever, together with explanations as to why they can be overlooked.

While most learning communities will agree on what should be happening, this paper will investigate why it is not and how these challenges can be overcome.

Collaborative Learning:

Why is it important?

‘The collaborative construction of knowledge by those willing to contribute is redefining the way we think about teaching and learning at every level’¹

Growing up in a web 2.0 world of sharing and connectivity, collaboration has become an accepted part of everyday life for the post-millennial students we now teach. A fourteen-year-old student today will not remember a time before the availability of Wikipedia and takes for granted collaborative applications such as social networking and video sharing sites. They will often use these tools creatively, freely sharing their ideas and commenting on the work of other users.

In the workplace too, collaborative working has become an essential skill, with tools such as Google Docs, Skype, Office 365 and Slack now commonplace. Generally considered more enjoyable than rote learning, collaboration promotes resilience, tenacity and teaches students how to solve problems together in preparation for the world of work.

There are myriad benefits to collaborative learning, not least that students will often derive greater enjoyment to work with their peers to solve a problem or complete a task. As well bringing educational advantages, collaborative learning promotes social skills, cooperation and teamwork, contributing to the wider social development of a student.

Collaborative learning often allows students to play to their strengths, becoming experts in a particular topic and reporting back to their peers. This can build competency, self-confidence and independence. Teachers report that students often respond very well when given ownership for their own learning, rising to the challenge of the task as required. Students often respond particularly well to explanations from their peers and, when tasks are well managed, enjoy finding out how to solve problems, retrieving information and presenting their discoveries to others.

Collaborative learning will often promote higher-order and evaluative skills, as well as creativity to reach a solution. This means that the ablest students are sufficiently stretched while the less able can benefit from their support. In fact, a recent PISA report finds that collaboration and communication are essential to the cultivation of 21st century proficiencies in all students, including critical thinking, problem-solving, self-management and Information and Communication Technology skills (ICT).²



¹Richardson, Will H. *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008.

²Draft PISA 2015 Collaborative Problem Solving Framework. n.p., 2013.

<https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/Draft%20PISA%202015%20Collaborative%20Problem%20Solving%20Framework%20.pdf>.

Collaborative Learning:

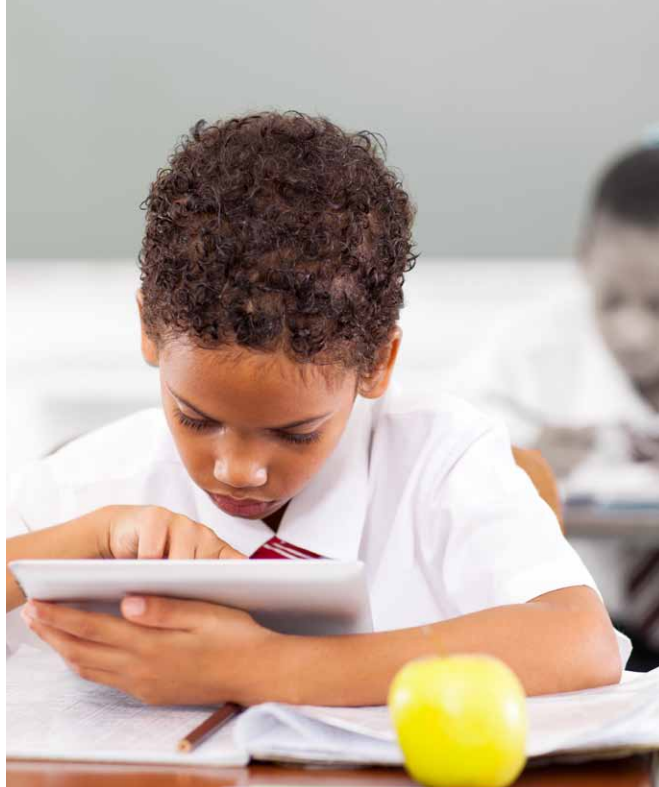
What are the challenges?

Collaborative learning is not without its frustrations and a commonly encountered difficulty is keeping students focused while quickly detecting off-task behaviour. Ofsted estimates that students lose up to an hour of learning time a day due to low level disruption such as unnecessary chatting, inappropriate mobile phone use and simply being slow to follow instructions³. This off-task behaviour can be exacerbated by classroom technology since student internet use can be particularly difficult to monitor on desktops and tablets.

Group work can sometimes intensify these difficulties as students are generally permitted greater independence since the teacher is unable to simultaneously monitor all groups. The role of the teacher during collaborative tasks tends to be that of the 'guide on the side' rather than the 'sage on the stage' which can mean relinquishing some degree of control. Educators might also find that it is more difficult to regain the attention of the entire class when students are engaged in collaborative work, particularly when they are using technology.

Moreover, group dynamics must also be thoughtfully managed so that the bulk of the workload doesn't simply fall on the shoulders of the more conscientious students. Students who are inclined to take a more passive role should be encouraged to contribute and the more dominant students helped to see that others must play their role. This holds as true within a primary setting as in higher education.

Likewise, students of all ages can take a dim view of collaborative work, even though it is considered enjoyable. Teachers find there can be a perception among students that collaborative working is less valuable than traditional classroom teaching and that working in mixed ability groups might hold them back.



How can collaboration improve learning outcomes?

In recent years, Ofsted has been extremely careful to refrain from elevating any particular style of teaching and documents repeatedly state that 'Ofsted has no preferred teaching style'⁴. However, it is a fact that collaborative learning is often to be found as part of a lively, stimulating and well-differentiated classroom consisting of learners who are enthusiastic and fully engaged. As such, it is natural that collaborative learning methods will regularly feature in Ofsted case studies of best practice⁵.

As well as naturally lending itself to cross-curricular key skills, such as literacy, numeracy and digital proficiency, collaborative learning is also acknowledged to be an essential part of the creative curriculum since students are required to innovate as a team. Group discussions will also require students to refine their speaking and listening skills, which assist with literacy development at a primary level, and later, as part of the formal assessment for GCSE English.

³Ofsted, *Below the Radar: Low-Level Disruption in Classrooms*, (n.p.: GOV.UK, 2014), 4–4, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/below-the-radar-low-level-disruption-in-the-countrys-classrooms>.

⁴Further Education and Skills Inspection Handbook from September 2015. n.p.: GOV.UK, 2015. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-handbook-from-september-2015>.

⁵"Social Enterprise as a Vehicle for Raising Students' Achievement." July 21, 2015. Accessed May 14, 2016. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-enterprise-as-a-vehicle-for-raising-students-achievement>.

Collaborative Learning:

Tools and best practice

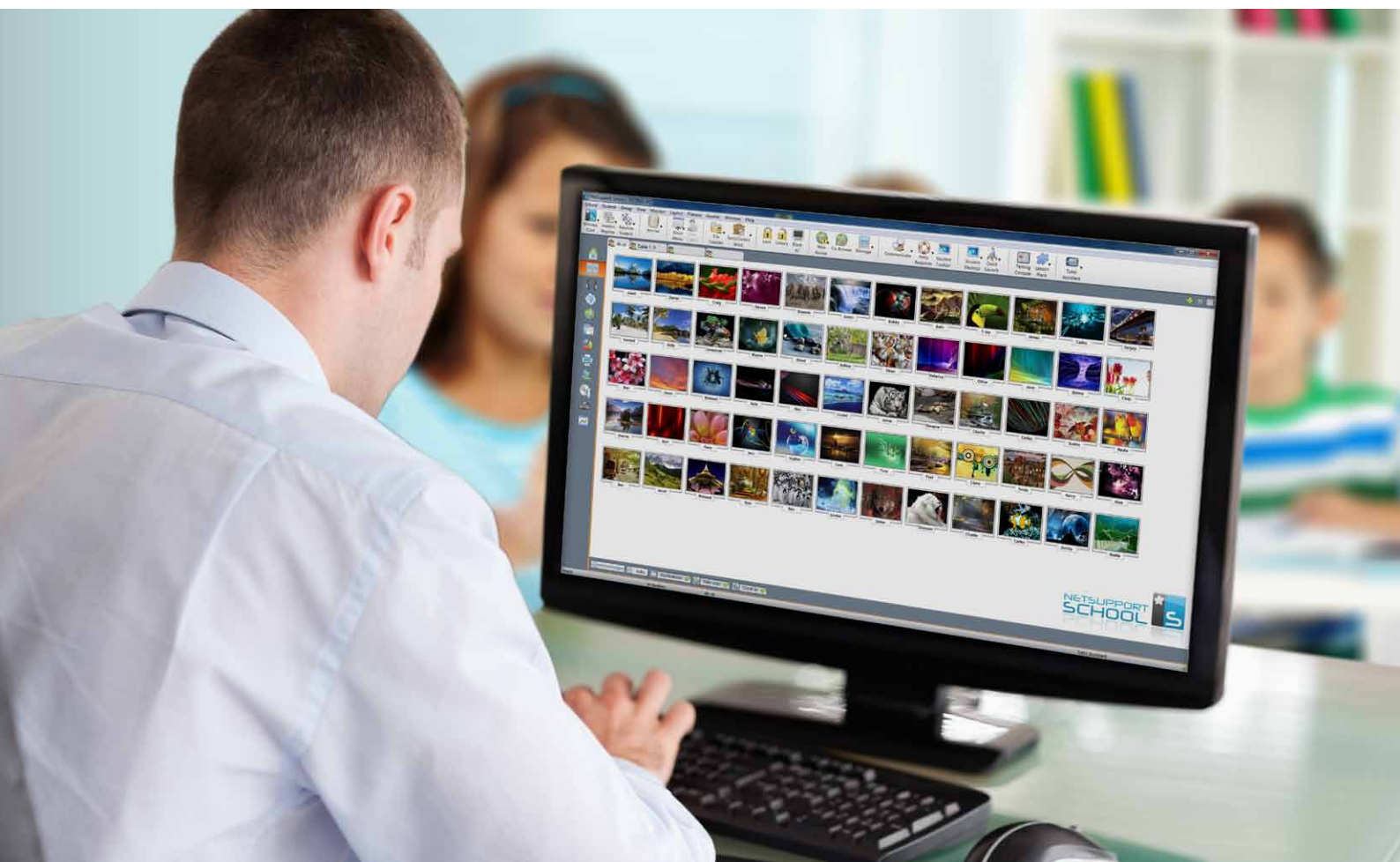
The success of a collaborative learning venture will naturally depend on well-designed activities that are differentiated to the requirements of the group. Digital tools can often support in this and there are many now available.

Many teachers find that a clearly defined direction and strong sense of structure is a prerequisite to effective collaboration. Skilled practitioners will therefore assign their learners particular roles when undertaking collaborative activities, as for instance, 'team leader', 'scribe' or 'data collector'. Using software such as NetSupport School, teachers can easily create electronic student groups of their choice and designate leaders.

Most students will regularly use social media outside of the classroom and will be wholly familiar with chat functions. Such collaborative applications can be useful when setting group homework, completing a flipped learning assignment or collaborating in class. Using NetSupport School, teachers can even showcase individual student screens to demonstrate a concept or model exemplar work, as required.

When overseeing collaborative activities, educators might find that they require a greater degree of control to ensure all students are working on task, particularly when using the internet. NetSupport School has dedicated tools to assist with this purpose, allowing staff to monitor student screens and track their learning. The software also enables instructors to limit internet access to relevant websites only.

It can also be reassuring to know that students' screens can be instantly locked whenever their attention is needed. This feature allows for an efficient transition from collaborative groupwork to traditional classwork, enabling the tutor to clarify tasks or provide further direction whenever necessary. This ensures that blended learning is well-paced, smoothly managed and consistently focused on learning.



Why is it important?

“Effective assessment has greater bearing on successful learning than almost any other factor.” Lynette Lall, JISC ⁶.

Assessment for learning (AFL) is a cornerstone of modern education and, arguably, now more significant than ever. With the pressures of external examinations and tests that now begin at primary level, it is imperative that learning does not become rote while instead students benefit from meaningful, rich feedback that helps them to improve.

Simply put, AFL is a way to track learning and can range from informal classroom discussions to an end of year external examination. Formative assessment is a means by which student progress and needs are tracked on an ongoing basis. Summative assessment, as the name implies, usually refers to more formal assessment techniques, as for example an end of unit test or externally assessed examination.

AFL, therefore, should extend beyond formally assessed and graded assignments. Indeed, the emphasis should be placed on progress rather than just accountability. Helpful, valuable assessment should consist of timely and regular feedback that helps learners to proceed with knowledge as to how to improve.

Research by Paul Black and Dylan William shows that shorter tests conducted on a regular basis are more effective than longer, less frequent summative strategies⁷ and that formative assessment should therefore be embedded into the curriculum. The difficulty, they say, with summative assessment alone is that it can encourage superficial learning. Moreover, learners will often compare themselves to their classmates, valuing the grade awarded above the learning achieved. AFL therefore encourages individual responsibility for learning and awareness of how to improve.

Although there is a clear need for a teacher to know how a student is performing in relation to national standards (not least because this is an Ofsted requirement), it is of greater importance that both teacher and learner are aware of current progress, together with the next stage of learning. Summative assessment, it is argued, tends to be backwards looking whereas formative assessment looks to the future.

In an outstanding learning environment, students are helped to develop their metacognitive learning skills and become active participants in their own education. Teachers support this by encouraging ongoing discussion and questioning. They clearly communicate their learning intentions to ensure that learners understand their sense of purpose and direction of learning. It is thus commonly recommended that teachers display learning objectives and outcomes throughout the course of the lesson, referring back to them with regularity. Equally important is that they are expressed in a way that is readily understandable to the student.

Embedded AFL will help teachers to gather information about their students' learning, adapting their plans according to emerging strengths, interests or points of misunderstanding. AFL need not be arduous, and quick techniques can be implemented extemporaneously to gauge understanding, as for instance, distinct types of classroom questioning. Feedback is key to the AFL process with self- and peer assessment methods helping students to reflect on their own progress. Any teacher feedback will ideally take the form of an ongoing conversation - be it verbal or otherwise - rather than just a set of instructions for improvement. For these reasons, some degree of comment-only marking is considered to be best practice.

⁶“Lynette Lall,” March 7, 2016, accessed April 17, 2016, <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/improving-student-assessment>.

⁷Paul Black and Dylan William, *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment: V. 1: Pt. 12* (London: Dept. of Education & Professional Studies, King's College London, 2005), 12–12.

Assessment:

What are the challenges?

As most teachers can attest, marking can be extremely time consuming and particularly so when teaching larger classes. With time pressures and other professional demands, some understandably struggle to ensure that feedback is always relevant and meaningful to the student.

Self- and peer assessment are both excellent in theory, but require close management of students, as well as extensive training in expectations, depending on the class. Teachers sometimes fear that that students can be overly generous in their peer marking, failing to point out errors where they arise. An additional concern is that learners will struggle to self-assess with any kind of objectivity, even against clearly defined success criteria in closely supervised conditions.⁸

Moreover, as any teacher will know, students are often wholly unaccustomed to reflecting on feedback and will simply focus on the grade. Both students and their parents can be resistant to comment-only methods of marking and reflective practices, particularly if this is not common practice across the whole school.

Students can also be reluctant to request help and actively participate in the learning conversations that are key to effective AFL. Discussing the relationship between assessment and students' self-esteem, Dylan William and Paul Black reach the conclusion that 'many are reluctant to ask questions out of fear of failure'.

Then there is also the gap between AFL best practice and the extent to which it is currently implemented in the classroom.

As Dylan William stated in a keynote talk at the Cambridge Assessment Network conference, 'Every teacher I have ever met knows the research on "wait time": the fact that students learn more if teachers wait at least three seconds after asking a question before providing hints or moving on to another student. The problem is that they just don't do this when they are teaching.'⁹



How can assessment improve learning outcomes?

It is widely accepted that high quality AFL will lead to improved student outcomes and higher standards at all levels: from nursery school to further education. Significantly too, the Ofsted Common Inspection Framework refers to the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. When undertaking lesson observations, an inspector will decide whether feedback is effective and that learners understand how they can improve¹⁰. Although this evidence need not take any particular format, assessment information should be used to inform future learning and ensure that all learners are sufficiently challenged.

Happily, effective AFL need not involve extensive preparation and can save significant amounts of valuable teacher time over the longer term. Ongoing, embedded formative assessment is generally far quicker to implement than formally assigned end of unit assessment while well-managed self- and peer assessment can save teachers hours of time spent marking.

Together with this, educators report that students who are given sufficient 'wait time' in lessons will provide longer and more detailed answers that demonstrate deeper understanding of the material covered. This can also result in fewer instances of plagiarism since students have a genuine understanding of concepts studied and less reason to rely on others' explanations.

⁸Paul Black and Dylan William, *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment*: V. 1: Pt. 12 (London: Dept. of Education & Professional Studies, King's College London, 2005), 9–9.

⁹CAA, *Excellence in Assessment: Assessment for Learning*, (n.p., 2006), http://www.assessment.org.uk/e-learning/file.php/1/Resources/Excellence_in_Assessment/Excellence_in_Assessment_-_Issue_1.pdf.

¹⁰"Common Inspection Framework: Education, Skills and Early Years from September 2015," August 28, 2015, accessed May 29, 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/common-inspection-framework-education-skills-and-early-years-from-september-2015.13>.

Assessment:

Tools and best practice

While there are a great many valuable classroom assessment techniques, 'wait time' is a particularly useful habit to cultivate when asking questions. Educators, for instance, will often encourage students to 'think-pair-share' when answering, many establishing a 'no hands-up' classroom. Likewise, NetSupport School's unique 'Question and Answer' (Q&A) module is designed specifically to support the AFL technique of 'basketball questioning' to encourage reflection, evaluation and higher order thinking skills. A particularly popular offshoot of this is the 'pose-pause-pounce-bounce' questioning style.

Using this technique, a teacher will pose an open-ended question to their entire class, explaining beforehand that nobody should respond in any way. The students are then given time to pause to reflect on the question. It is here that teachers are encouraged to hold the pause for perhaps a little longer than they might normally so that all students are given the opportunity to formulate their own ideas. It is only then that the teacher should pounce on a particular student to share their response before the bounce to a second student, perhaps to solicit their opinion of the first response.

Embedded formative assessment need not be arduous and many teachers will just request a quick 'thumbs up' or 'thumbs down' mid-lesson to gauge understanding. The 'Student Survey' tool in NetSupport School allows teachers to instantaneously capture student understanding by setting a question, or series of questions, for the entire class. Teachers could also issue mini whiteboards to answer quick questions and 'progression traffic lights' are now common with students displaying coloured cups or cards to communicate their depth of understanding.

Regular self- and peer assessment is also considered to be good practice so that students can evaluate their own learning. Assessment techniques such as 'two stars and a wish' can be a useful way of identifying aspects of learning that have gone well (the stars), as well as one area for improvement (the wish). Older learners might prefer to create their own success criteria or student-friendly mark schemes for assessment purposes.

The 'Digital Student Journal' in NetSupport School allows for improved metacognition and timely self-assessment since students are continuously reflecting upon their progress. Teachers flipping their classroom also find the 'Digital Student Journal' to be a useful tool since notes and other learning resources can be easily collated for students to access as required.



Conclusion



Well-designed collaborative learning and excellent AFL practices together form the basis of outstanding teaching and learning. This helps to develop independently-minded, well-motivated and resilient students who actively participate in their learning. Learning communities, in turn, benefit from deeper subject knowledge and engagement, giving themselves the best chance of strong examination results and inspection outcomes.

NetSupport School is the ideal partner for any computer-based lesson and perfect for leveraging the value of technology in today's modern classroom. The software combines PC monitoring, instruction and collaboration tools with a host of Ofsted-based best practice assessment features to ensure teachers can achieve the best outcomes for their students.

Within the assessment module, the unique Question and Answer (Q&A) tool allows students to feed back on each other's answers in real time, making for a lively and vibrant collaborative learning environment. Teachers using this module can draw upon a range of questioning strategies, including 'pose-pause-pounce-bounce'.

Digital quiz creation tools also help teachers to assess students' understanding of content with minimal preparation required. It can be useful to set the quiz to 'auto-mark' so that students receive instantaneous feedback. In this way, both student and teacher can see exactly where improvement can be made without placing excessive demands on teacher time. Peer and group assessment activities are also digitally supported with NetSupport School, ensuring effective formative assessment throughout the course of a unit. Working with NetSupport School's 'Pot Luck' feature, students can be selected for questioning at random, ensuring that all are engaged as active classroom participants.

Mid-lesson assessment is made easy with the 'Student Survey' tool, with which teachers can instantaneously capture student understanding by setting a question for the entire class. This helps the educator to quickly evaluate the progress of all learners before using the information to move the learning forward.

Since many teachers are keen to develop their students' metacognitive skills, learning objectives can be displayed on student screens within the toolbar throughout the course of the lesson using NetSupport School. This helps students to monitor their progress, reflect upon their development and take ownership of their learning. Students using NetSupport School can even discreetly request teacher assistance via a 'Help Request' icon on their screen if attention is required.

Teachers can create chat discussions involving selected students, such as those identified as Gifted and Talented. Or alternatively, the entire class can collaborate together on the whiteboard using NetSupport School's integrated drawing and annotation tools. Crucially, a teacher using NetSupport School has the flexibility to respond to the needs of their particular class at any given time – perhaps using 'exhibit mode' to showcase the work of a student who has worked hard, or to lock the screen of another who is becoming distracted.

It is evident that digital tools should always help rather than hinder the work of the teacher, serving to support rather than dictate student learning. Properly harnessed and thoughtfully designed to support best pedagogical practices, classroom management software can support teachers to ensure that learning is as effective as it can possibly be.

NetSupport School leverages the best of digital technology; supporting excellence in teaching, learning and assessment.

Try NetSupport School for free with a 30-day trial and see for yourself the benefits it can bring your school.
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