Goal Five Reflective Essay: Assessment

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Assessment

Assessment in the classroom is key in developing learners. Assessment is the stage of learning that shows students how they are doing and it shows teachers how well their teaching techniques are supporting the students. It has an ongoing element and a finality to it as well. I believe an effective classroom assessment system includes formative assessment with quality feedback, and summative assessment that assesses knowledge and understanding.

In the Staff Handbook (2015) for the high school at which I am currently student teaching, the grading structure is described this way: “Assignments that are primarily designed for mastering content rather than exhibition of content mastery are formative (e.g. homework, daily classwork, bell questions, small quizzes, etc.). Summative assessments are assignments designed to allow students to demonstrate their mastery of content (e.g. major tests, projects, productions, finals, etc.)” (p. 5). When I was a student, I always noticed a personal gap in my formative and summative grades. I would always do very well in everything formative, but tests were hard for me. There seemed to be this unexplainable lack of correlation. I could ace all of my homework without a problem but when I was tested on the material I often would not do well. Upon reflection I concluded that the ease at which I completed my formative assignments was relatively common. If I did the work, I got the grade. But the purpose of the formative work was lost on me.

Formative assessments are meant to provide feedback for students. According to Black and Wiliam (2009) “A formative interaction is one in which an interactive situation influences cognition. It is an interaction between external stimulus and feedback, and internal production by the individual learner which involves looking at the three aspects, the external, the internal and their interactions” (p. 11). Therefore, formative assessment is all about feedback. As a student, I was going for the grade, not the understanding, and the feedback I was getting: my grades, told me that I understood when in reality I didn’t.

So what should feedback look like?  Winne and Butler (1995) describe feedback as, “information with which a learner can confirm, add to, and overwrite, tune, or restructure information in memory, whether that information is domain knowledge, meta-cognitive knowledge, beliefs about self and tasks, or cognitive tactics and strategies” (p. 5740). Basically, feedback should push students to become self-regulated learners. In my experience as a secondary student and as a student teacher I notice that a lot of students view school not as something they partake in, but rather something that happens to them. It is rarely a place where they actively participate in their own learning. Feedback is something that can change that.

University staff David Nicol and Debra MacFarlane-Dick (2005) offer seven principles of good feedback. Good feedback must clarify what good performance is, facilitate self-reflection, deliver high quality information to students about their learning, encourage teacher/ peer dialogue, encourage positive motivation and self-esteem, provide opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance, and it must provide information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching (p. 5). I believe that feedback should be specific and timely when it is from the teacher. But self-generated feedback from the students can be just as, if not more influential. I believe that a very important part of the formative process is to encourage meta-cognition. Nicol and Dick’s second and third feedback principles speak to this specifically. Teachers should have students reflect on their own thinking and learning process.

While instructing students on an essay assignment, I told them about my writing experience. I told them that over the years I have found out how to get myself to focus. Personally, if I chew gum, move to a new environment every half hour, and choose environments that I get to share with other people (as long as it’s not too noisy) I can focus on writing for a long time. Then I asked them to reflect in pairs on what helps them focus. Doing this, they will develop a learning identity, and will be able to improve their self-regulated learning. This is self-generated feedback. I was never encouraged to do this as a student until college, and I noticed a huge difference. Once I gained an understanding of how my brain works when it comes to learning, I became much more self-regulated in my studies.

We’ve talked about formative assessment and how it is paramount in generating self-regulated learners. The other part of assessment is summative. Senior Lecturer of University of Sunderland Maddelena Tarras defines summative assessment as “a judgment which encapsulates all the evidence up to a given point. This point is seen as a finality at the point of the judgment.” (p. 468). In other words, summative assessment is a grade that sums up students’ understanding on a unit of instruction. Do the students know the material? Did they learn what they should have? This generally is a comprehensive essay, a summative project, or a test, the assignments I always dreaded. According to Tarras (2005) “summative assessment has been blamed for many problems related to assessment in our education system and as an obstacle to the growth of formative assessment” (p. 476). However, if formative assessment is done right, summative assessment will be naturally do-able for students.

In conclusion, I believe that a good assessment system consists of two parts, formative and summative. However, formative assessment must be recognized for its incredible importance, and it should be accompanied by robust feedback, given by the teacher as well as generated by the student, encouraging self-regulated learning. With these things in place, the results of summative assessment will yield much more desirable results.

References

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