Background and rationale

The overall aim of this project was to implement a number of assessment for learning (AfL) principles within a higher education (HE) context. The project was undertaken within the Cardiff School of Education from 2003 onwards. It began with a module delivered at level 5 of the National Qualifications Framework as part of the three-year full time BA (Hons) Primary Education course. The input was compulsory for all students in the second year cohort and linked closely with the students' experiences during their school placement. The content addressed many of the key professional and pedagogical skills of teachers, for example, planning, classroom organisation, management of pupil behaviour, learning theories, teaching methods and the assessment of pupils' learning. The principles of assessment for learning formed part of this module's content, and, as the team of tutors responsible for its construction and delivery believed that it was important to model the best practice in their own pedagogy,
assessment for learning practices were built into the teaching, learning and assessment of the module.

Approaches to assessment in HE are predominantly driven by the need to collate marks/grades in order to feed into degree classifications and to calculate students’ accumulation of credit points. They are, therefore, inevitably summative and HE frameworks do not necessarily lend themselves to formative methods of assessment (Cook, 2007). However, this project sets out to investigate how AfL can be aligned with summative assessment methods within an undergraduate framework, thus providing a supportive environment which would facilitate student-centred learning.

The Assessment Reform Group (2002b) published research which investigated the impact of summative testing on pupils’ motivation for learning. What emerged from the work was strong evidence to suggest that this form of assessment had a negative impact upon motivation. As HE is dependent upon summative forms of assessment for degree classifications, the possible impact upon students’ motivation and self-esteem could influence their learning during higher education and beyond. Torrence and Pryor (1998) believe that what is sometimes described as formative assessment is actually a repeated form of summative or continuous assessment rather than true formative assessment. This is what Black et.al. (2003) describe as ‘micro-summative assessment’, being a series of short tests and assessments.

However, AfL changes the focus from assessments that are carried out on particular occasions and can be formal in nature, to an informal approach that is designed to promote the students’ learning. It is ‘embedded in all aspects of teaching and learning’ (Black et.al. 2003). An activity that incorporates AfL not only provides feedback for the teacher, but can also aid students in assessing themselves and each other. This then can impact upon the teaching and learning activities. The assessment Reform group offer this definition for AfL,

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\text{The process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers, to identify where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there. (ARG, 2002a)}
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AfL is another term for sound formative assessment practices and in 1998 a significant insight into these practices was offered by Black and William (1998). They undertook a review of some 250 sources linked to formative assessment, over a nine year period. The results of this extensive review were published in 'Inside the Black Box'. The resultant analysis highlighted positive benefits from formative assessment on learning and achievement at all levels of education (Juwah et.al., 2004).

Research into AfL in post-compulsory education is less well developed by comparison to school-based research. The recommendations are that more should be done to develop assessment policies which could underpin lifelong learning ambitions rather than undermine them (Torrance, 2004). Within the higher education context, an increasingly diverse student body together with large teaching groups frequently mean that only higher degree students receive the luxury of one-to-one tutorials and individual formative feedback on their work (Hill, 1995).

Based upon the principles of assessment for learning advocated by the Assessment Reform Group, Juwah et al. (2004) provide a conceptual model for Higher Education in order to enhance student learning through effective formative feedback. The seven AfL principles proposed are closely linked to those advocated for use in primary and secondary education.
The innovation/the research

When modifying the learning, teaching and assessment strategies employed in the delivery of the work to the students, the project team drew from the considerable research base which already exists on assessment for learning, though, as has been suggested, much of this research centres upon learning in schools rather than higher education (Assessment Reform Group 2002a). Particular emphasis was placed on the following practices which have been identified in research as essential to assessment for learning (James, 2003):

- Helping learners to understand what counts as quality in learning by explicit reference to clear assessment criteria and the use of exemplars of good practice.

- Providing appropriate feedback with an emphasis on ways of improving. Comments rather than marks were offered.

- Timing the submission of assignments in such a way that students were able to re-draft their work in the light of formative feedback received in relation to previous assignments.

- Engaging learners to participate in peer and self-assessment.

The project set out to incorporate these principles into the work with students. Opportunities were given to the BA year 2 cohort to choose a specific topic linked to an aspect of primary pedagogy discussed during the preceding weeks. From these topics three reflective reports would make up the assignment and they would be submitted at various points during the module in order for tutors to provide formative feedback for each report prior to the next one being written. The cohort was informed that the emphases for these reflective reports was on “linking theory and practice” and were given three specific criteria for the assignment:

- the depth of reflective thought and analysis of the topics;
- the amount of research undertaken by them, including publications as well as electronic references;
- the ability to link theory and personal experience.

They were also reminded of the normal practice on the course: that the UWIC general assessment criteria available in the Student Handbook would be used in marking their work. It was explained that, whereas their tutors would provide and record marks, the first two reports would be returned with formative comments only.

During the first taught session students were shown an exemplar piece of work from the previous cohort which had been awarded a first class honours classification. They were asked to analyse this piece of work using both the general and specific criteria for the assignment so that they came to recognise what counted as quality and what made this a first class piece of work. Subsequent years have seen the introduction of a range of examples of reflective reports so that students are able to assess them against the specific criteria. This provides rich discussion during tutorial groups on what constituted an effective reflective report.
Elements of self and peer assessment were introduced through taught sessions during the module. As Juwah et al. (2004, p.6) state, “Over the last decade there has been an increasing interest in strategies that encourage students to take a more active role in the management of their own learning”. For their final report students used tutorial time to exchange views on how they’d responded to their individual targets. The intention of the self and peer assessment elements was not to make the students reliable markers of theirs and others’ work. This would be misunderstanding its purpose. The whole point is ‘that students internalise academic standards and are subsequently able to supervise themselves as they study and write and solve problems,’ (Gibbs, 2006, p.27).

The Outcomes

The first reflective reports were submitted in November 2004. The usual practice in the School of Education is for students to submit with all coursework assignments a form which includes a section inviting them to complete a self-assessment of their work against the relevant criteria. Across all courses, the quality of these self-assessments is highly variable with some students offering brief comments which pay little heed to the specific assessment criteria for the assignment. Each second year student duly completed one of these forms and submitted it with his or her first report. Before the second report was submitted, it was decided to devise a new self-assessment form which would encourage the students to highlight their strengths in the light of their first formative feedback. These forms also asked them to identify areas which they felt still needed improvement. They were given guidance on the completion of these forms, again using the criteria which had been explained in the taught sessions. The final report was submitted along with all other reports and feedback forms. The students completed a School of Education assignment assessment sheet with the third reflective report.

The first and second reports were assessed by tutors during the module these were then returned to students containing structured feedback, not only identifying strengths but also setting specific targets for improvement. Many of these targets referred to generic skills, such as use of texts, accurate referencing, and the ability to analyse and use examples from practice to engage in critical reflection. Thus, it was hoped that by addressing these targets the students would show improvement in the next report, even though it was concerned with a different topic. Although marks were allocated for these reflective reports, they were not shared with the students, in line with another principle of AfL encapsulated by Gibbs, “Any feedback that focuses on an individual’s overall performance (in the form of a mark or grade), rather than on their individual learning, detracts from learning.” (Gibbs, 2006, p.27).

There were definite indications of improvements, as there was a significant difference between the first and second mark. Over the whole cohort a mean improvement of eight marks was discovered. This mode of assessment was repeated over the following two years and similar results were noted.

These outcomes also reflected a major conclusion reached by the Assessment Reform Group that the gains are greater for the less able student. During the academic session 2003 - 2004 it was observed that those who received a third class honours mark in their first report made an average improvement of 10.3 marks by the end of the module. Students whose initial assignments fell within the category of a lower second class honours improved by 5.4 marks, while a gain of only 1.5 was observed in the case of students whose initial mark was in the upper second class honours classification. Since only three students received first class marks in their initial report the number was too small to be a useful indicator. The results obtained in 2003 - 2004 were reflected in 2005 - 2006 and again in 2006 – 2007.
Evaluation

One obvious criticism could be that as the tutors marked the reflective reports themselves they created the improvement. In order to address any suggestion of this, a 10% sample of the reports was marked blind by a colleague who had previously worked on the module, plus a sample was viewed by another colleague as would an external examiner in order to verify the marks.

There are definite indications that the improvements between the first mark and second mark are significant, suggesting that the first formative feedback is meaningful for the students. This may highlight one weakness in the assignment criteria. It may be that the criteria are not sufficiently detailed to enable students to ‘break the code’. As Sadler, (1989) and Black and Wiliam (1998) believe, “students can only achieve a learning goal if they understand that goal, assume some ownership of it, and can assess progress”. It may be that a more structured and detailed criteria for the reflective reports would reduce the gap between first and second marks. During 2007/8 tutors have used taught sessions to break down the three main criteria, as it was noted in previous years that students encountered problems with understanding exactly what they meant.

One practice that I was very keen to include was that of returning students' work by the following session. This put obvious pressure on the team of tutors, however, the students appreciated being able to use the prompt formative comments to help develop the next reflective report. As Gibbs propounds, 'The crucial variable appears not to be the quality of the feedback (which is what teachers tend to focus on) but the quality of student engagement with that feedback.' (Gibbs, 2006 p.26).

Benefits and drawbacks

The initial work undertaken on this project and subsequent development could pave the way for the creation of a model incorporating AfL, that enhances the quality of learning and teaching and which could be transferred to other programmes within the School. Analysis of the marks and student responses would indicate the potential to raise standards of students' attainment and therefore degree classifications. Through self assessment and their response to constructive feedback, students would be involved directly in the assessment process and take responsibility for their own learning. Further work in this area may heighten students’ critical awareness of their own performance; aid their development as reflective practitioners and feed into the firmly embedded profiling system within the ITET programmes. Using this model, UWIC staff may be able to model good practice in their own teaching regarding the benefits of AfL thus enhancing student-centred learning.

Drawbacks in rolling this model out into other programmes could include the varying patterns of assessment used across the school and across UWIC, thus restricting the amount of possible formative feedback during modules. Also, incorporating AfL principles into the teaching delivery such as self/peer assessment; explicit reference to exemplar assignments; varying the timing of submissions may be new to some tutors and could possibly go against their own teaching and learning philosophy.
Further Developments

The most significant formative feedback was linked to the first report, therefore modifications have been made for the 2007/8 period. Formative tutor comments will still be given for the first reflective report, but a more structured self and peer assessment proforma will be used with students for their second report. At least three targets will be suggested by tutors based on the first piece of work. For the second report, rather than tutor comments, students will bring the report to a teaching session. During this time they will reflect upon their personal targets and describe examples from their second report where they’ve addressed these specific targets. The peer assessment element will consist of students sharing this evidence base on how they’ve responded to the targets for improvement with fellow students. There will be no need for peers to read and comment on the full report but they can offer feedback on the evidence of how the improvements have been achieved.

Conclusion

The evidence, although limited, does concur with other case studies (Juwah et al., 2004) that with certain assessment patterns, principles of AfL can be introduced into the teaching and learning within HE, even against a background of a dominant summative assessment need.

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