

# *Reflections on an Action Research Project: Improving Understanding of Art Terminology with a Low-ability Year 8 Class*

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## ABSTRACT

Formative assessment is known to have an impact on pupil attainment (Hattie, 2012; Black et al., 2004; Wiliam, 2011). As such it is frequently written about, and its importance was reiterated throughout my Initial Teacher Training (including a module on formative assessment) and subsequent professional development programmes. This article reports on an action research project<sup>1</sup> working with my low-ability Year 8 class, many of whom have Additional Learning Needs (ALN). I developed, implemented and evaluated formative assessment strategies aimed at improving motivation, confidence and the quality of the work made by these pupils. As Bell (2010: 6) states, action research is ‘carried out by practitioners who have themselves identified a need for change or improvement’. My particular concern was the gap in understanding, motivation and progress between the pupils in my low-ability Year 8 class and mainstream classes. In this article I will, first, briefly discuss my methodological approach and the key literature that informed the decisions I made. I will then discuss the findings, and give more detail on the process of the development of the intervention. In conclusion I consider the importance of practitioner research for teachers and teaching.

**Keywords:** Additional Learning Needs, action research, art, secondary education.

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### *Introduction*

The project started with a broad concern to improve feedback, but became increasingly more focused on how formative assessment can be integrated in art lessons to promote and facilitate the independent learning of pupils in a low-ability set. I chose to work with the pupils in my low-ability Year 8 class, because I felt that I did not fully understand their barriers to learning and so was not meeting their needs. When pupils are identified as ‘less able’, Hart et al. (2004, in Wilson, 2009: 17) question whether it is a comment on their capacity for learning. I believe that there is a danger that the label of ‘low ability’ can create an issue for pupils’ expectations of themselves, which was further reasoning as to my decision to work with them.

Pupils are set into the low-ability class as a result of testing. Baseline data on the class stated that their National Reading Test scores were below that of the other mainstream classes as the average mainstream class score is 110 and the average in this class is 82. The school guidance states that a score of 70–85 is classed as ‘low average’. This indicated the potential need for differentiated instruction as well as feedback. Individual Education Plans (IEPs) detail different levels of additional support. The class size is half the size of the mainstream class and acts as a ‘nurture group’, allowing for more time spent with the pupils, with the aim for movement back into mainstream classes.

The intervention involved two significant changes to my practice. The first was to design a ‘sticker’ using visual cues to make feedback more concise. The second was to produce several examples of completed art work, from poor to excellent. This was a more visual method of providing lesson aims and success criteria for the pupils. This system also engaged pupils in critical reflection of their own work, and the work of their peers.

### *Methodology*

For my research, I decided to adopt a primarily qualitative approach to data collection. This is due to the nature of art and design, and my research being primarily aimed at both measuring and assessing pupils’ progression, artistic knowledge and attitude towards learning; all of which are difficult to measure quantitatively. Also, the inquiry was based on gaining insight into teacher and pupil attitudes and perceptions of current feedback practices in school. This requires a ‘thicker’ interpretation of views, which is the prime function of qualitative data (Bell, 2010). The data was collected

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through the use of recorded one-to-one interviews, questionnaires, structured and unstructured conversations and worksheets (that included sentence starters, closed questions and self-assessment questions to understand if pupils could use terms in the correct contexts). These were carried out before, during and after the intervention. I also kept a journal in order to reflect on each stage of the research. BERA (2011: 5) states that 'individuals should be treated fairly, sensitively, with dignity and within an ethic of respect and freedom from discrimination'. Therefore, all pupils in the class (thirteen) were invited to take part in the research, but needed to consent. They were also reminded throughout interviews and questionnaires that they could remove themselves from the research at any point. I carried out the research over the course of six one-hour lessons with a focus group of seven pupils.

### *Findings and analysis*

During my initial reconnaissance phase, less than a fifth of pupils said that they always understood feedback, and over three-quarters said that they didn't understand it some or all of the time. These initial figures and pupils' reactions to questions on the topic of feedback suggested the need for change.

Pupils also completed a questionnaire to check their understanding, for example of tone, colour, presentation, detail and scale. These terms were chosen due to their frequent use in feedback and instruction. Only one of the seven pupils gave correct answers, and the remaining pupils answered that they either didn't understand these terms, or defined them in a different context or incorrectly.

The staff were also sent a questionnaire on their views of feedback. There was a consensus that feedback is important, but three-quarters stated that they think that pupils in their low-ability class only understand it 'sometimes'. A quarter of staff said that pupils in their low-ability class struggle to work independently and just under half said that they don't appear to display confidence when working.

Three broad themes emerged from coding the data:

1. motivation and confidence
2. understanding of task
3. understanding of keywords

These themes, from my initial data collection, when cross-referenced with the aim of my research, were then distilled into sub themes:

1. independent learning and soft skills such as behaviour and motivation
2. quality of work
3. language and understanding

These themes then became the basis of my research of the wider literature, in order to gain a deeper knowledge and insight, to help me understand the issues, develop an appropriate pedagogical response and evaluate any impact I made.

### *Key literature*

Assessment for Learning (AfL) or formative assessment, is defined by the Assessment Reform Group (2002: 2) 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’. Gipps et al. (2000, cited in Hargreaves, 2005: 215) describes AfL as using the information gained via assessment to identify whether a recap of the task, time for further practice or movement onto the next stage in learning is needed. Wiliam (2006, cited in Education Scotland, n.d.) describes formative assessment as the tools that are used to improve learning and achievements by adapting teaching, based on information gathered from pupils’ prior achievements.

Black et al. (2004: 2) state that from evidence in over 250 articles, the positive effect that formative assessment has in raising pupil attainment is undeniable. Research states that in order to promote learning, it is imperative that formative assessment becomes the cornerstone of teaching and learning and not a ‘tick-box’ task or a ‘bolt-on’ (DCSF, 2008; Donaldson, 2015).

In writing about assessment, many researchers refer to a metaphorical ‘gap’ – where the ‘gap’ might refer to the space between where pupils are in their learning and where they aim, or where the teacher aims for them to be (Weeden et al., 2002; Price et al., 2010; Hargreaves, 2005; Hughes, 2014). AfL therefore could be described as the tool that can close this space and move learners forward.

I then direct my literature review to consider the question: how can formative assessment be effectively implemented into an ALN art setting to promote and facilitate independent learning?

A problem that I faced as an art teacher which led to this focus is that it is difficult to know what 'effective' formative assessment *looks like* and how it can be practically implemented. The subjective nature of the work created in art, and the need for whole school consistency in regards to feedback, makes it difficult to be able to effectively and regularly provide feedback whilst paying heed to both the department's and wider school's expectations and approaches.

Another challenge I faced in my teaching was finding ways to meaningfully and explicitly embed formative assessment strategies into my teaching, whilst also delivering the curriculum, the Literacy and Numeracy Framework and Curriculum Cymreig.<sup>2</sup>

Formative assessment in the arts is challenging. In a recent review of best practice in the creative arts, Estyn (2016: 37) state that 'teachers provide frequent formative feedback to pupils that focuses on clear success criteria'. Therefore, it became apparent that success criteria needed to be explicit, but in order for this to happen, teachers need to know what they expect from the pupils.

I began to question how art teachers understand the concept of *quality* and what constitutes a desirable completed piece of work, or the 'gold standard' for pupils' work. This is often highly subjective, difficult to articulate and 'in the head of' the teacher. However, pupils are meant to work towards it. Cowley (2005) also points out the difficulty of remaining impartial when comparing work against each other. Therefore, being explicit is paramount.

My own concept of quality work has come from past experience, as a fine arts graduate and informal conversations with my head of department. As a result, because everyone has different experiences, this creates diversity in schools' judgement of the quality work, which is ultimately dependent on the judgement of the individual teacher. In the context of delivering schemes of work, this can create a discontinuity between the teachers' expectations and the pupils' understanding of what they are aiming for.

Day (1985 in Gruber, 2008) echoes this barrier that art assessment presents due to the subjectivity of the work and states that often the categories which are used to assess the work against are vague and don't always promote further learning. Reflecting on this, one of my key aims is to aid pupils in acquiring core vocabulary in art, understanding what key terms mean and what they look like in actual pieces of work. In doing so pupils ought to be more able to understand instruction and lesson aims, and work more independently.

In terms of seeing what these categories and words look like in practice, Sweller et al. (1998 cited in Shute, 2007: 7) argue that the use of examples reduce the ‘cognitive load for low-ability students’. Previously I had, in introducing a new topic or piece of work, only given one, excellent example. As a result of the literature, I thought that multiple examples displaying different levels of quality in each category might help pupils’ understanding and lighten the cognitive load. In addition, the use of other examples, not only an excellent, largely unattainable one, might improve pupils’ motivation and self-efficacy.

As mentioned at the start of this article, I wanted to find a way to improve the motivation, confidence and the quality of the work made by the pupils in my focus group by giving them tools to achieve an outcome of which they were proud. Rethinking AfL, visual representation of expectations and a range of visual examples seemed to be good ways forward.

#### *Developing a visual scaffolding system for formative assessment*

The focus of my project was initially general research into the effectiveness of feedback. When my research began, it had the working title ‘Using feedback to help pupils with ALN to learn’.

During the reconnaissance stage, through pupil voice activities, it was clear that pupils couldn’t access their feedback. The two main reasons for this were the comprehension of it and the ability to read the handwritten feedback. Due to the need for whole school consistency, prior to the intervention, feedback consisted of a model of WWW and EBI (What Went Well and Even Better If) and it typically consisted of four sentences.

I began by making small changes to my practice using a simple inquiry cycle of consider, plan, do and review. During this development phase I ran four cycles of the inquiry:

1. I designed a sticker which had visual cues to information and made feedback concise.
2. I realised that they didn’t understand some words, e.g. ‘presentation’, in an art context so had to further develop the sticker.
3. I taught the words and added relevant symbols to the sticker as further visual cues.
4. I realised that the sticker was a first step and instead I had to focus on

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helping pupils understand the words visually, and know how to apply them in order to improve understanding of feedback.

During each cycle, informal discussions and evaluation by pupils identified the next iteration of the sticker.

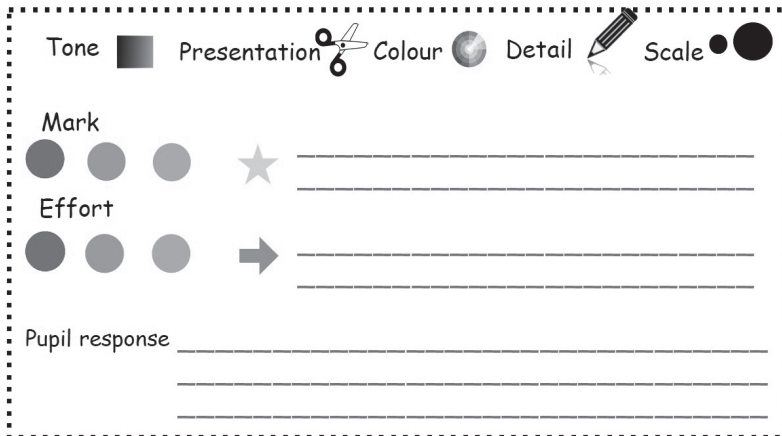
During the fourth cycle, I wanted to use the system more extensively to teach pupils how to recognise what was required and how to improve their ability and skills through the use of effective AfL. I decided to focus on my most commonly used artistic key terms:

1. tone
2. colour
3. presentation
4. detail

Over a series of four lessons, working on one art project, pupils were supported in focusing on one of these key categories. They used the new AfL approach in relation to one key term per lesson.

The final version of this system for AfL in my classroom had two clear aspects. The first was the sticker (Figure 1), developed in several cycles, to support pupils to assess their own and peers' skills. The second was not just

Figure 1



using one, teacher-made, excellent example. Pupils were instead given five examples of varying quality, focusing on the theme for that lesson, for example, tone. During the starter, pupils worked collaboratively to place the examples in an order from unsatisfactory to outstanding and were encouraged to articulate why they were in that order. Pupils then used this as a visual signpost in the lesson and it aided their understanding of how to improve their work.

Corden (2000 cited in Hodgen and Marshall, 2005), defines scaffolding as the facilitation of learning by the use of organised learning opportunities which allow pupils to develop and extend their current knowledge. By differentiating the quality of the expected outcomes and providing different levels of learning opportunities, my aim was that all pupils would feel empowered and feel that they could achieve at least one of the standards.

It also made the expectations explicit and, as Gruber (2008) states, the use of objective outcomes which relate explicitly to clear criteria can reduce the ambiguity. Shute (2007) points out that ambiguity and uncertainty are disconcerting, and so reducing this may increase motivation. Therefore, I believed that by concentrating on making the feedback and assessment process more explicit, it would (and did) improve the progress of these pupils and help them to become more confident, independent learners. I found that because pupils were more aware of the process of feedback and assessment, they were more engaged and motivated to make progress because they could recognise it.

Black et al. (2004) describe how written feedback can often be conscientious, but it may not offer learners adequate information or guidance which is needed to improve. By using this scaffolding system, I found that the feedback I was giving to pupils during the lesson was with the purpose of aiding pupils in reaching the next standard. This enabled them to progress in their learning in part by embedding, visually and kinaesthetically, the meanings of the terms we focused on.

Wiliam (2011: 66–7) explains how a teacher chose three exemplar pieces of work from the class and then the pupils were asked to explain the ‘good’ aspects of these pieces of work. Wiliam continues by stating how this serves two important purposes. The first is that it provides ‘concrete examples’ of how a ‘good’ piece of work looks. The second is that it enables the pupils to be more engaged with the feedback process. As it is more cognitively challenging for them to compare their work to an exemplar piece, recognising strengths and improvements, this is preferable to simply receiving feedback from a teacher or peer. Similarly, my ‘signpost examples’



were also used during the plenary of the lesson for peer and self assessment. This gave pupils the chance to assess their work and use their oracy skills to assess the work of a peer.

I wrote at the start of this article that my aim was for pupils to become more independent and have more understanding of artistic terminology, and that this was in order for them to make the same relative progress as the mainstream classes. Pupils demonstrated through their work that they understood what was being asked of them, and they tried to solve problems themselves by asking their peers and going to look at the examples on the board without asking for help numerous times during the lesson.

The outcomes of the intervention were the improved quality of their work, the improved understanding of artistic terminology and the increase in confidence and motivation.

Discussions with the focus group indicated that they valued seeing examples because they could see where they thought they could go 'wrong', they knew to take their time, and they commented on their improved confidence, almost seeming surprised at what they had achieved.

Pupils' work also improved in quality, with the work before the intervention being cross moderated with my head of department as level 4, and the work after the intervention as level 5–6. The work demonstrates that they have a greater understanding of each of the terms through the application of tone on the face, the quality of their presentation in comparison to previous work, and the addition of detail.

Pupils could confidently, with the aid of sentence guides, write about their work and the work of their peers (as indicated by these worksheet extracts):

I have used detail well because it is neat and has very good contrast. I have presented my work well because it is eye catching.

It looks very detailed because it has strong cheekbones. She has shaded all the light bits and dark bits.

They were also far less afraid of making 'mistakes'. It could be argued that the creativity of the pupils was restricted with the guidelines of the scaffolding system, however, as pupils become more confident, the aim is that the system becomes less needed or is developed to allow for more freedom.

Figure 2. Work made prior to the intervention



Figure 3. The work from the intervention



*Reflections on conducting action research*

In an ever changing education system where the role of the teacher seems overly controlled by outside factors, the need for teachers to be researchers helps to regain some of this control and make changes which make a direct benefit on the learning of the pupils – which should always be our central focus. The busyness of school sometimes can mean that it is difficult to pay sufficient attention to the teaching and learning experiences of pupils.

I believe that there is a real need for schools to be homes of action researchers, although I acknowledged the difficulties this presents with teaching commitments, the support it requires and the time to carry out such research. We are encouraged to be reflective as teachers, however an action researcher is a reflective practitioner, but with the addition of data collection techniques and a research literacy to make sense of the reflection (Denscombe, 2014; Bell, 2010).

Action research and teacher leadership also have a positive impact on the confidence and morale of the teachers. Recently, *The Independent* (Cassidy, 2015) reported that a study conducted by the National Union of Teachers found that over half of teachers are thinking of leaving teaching within the next two years. If teachers are to take more autonomy over their practice, I believe they are more likely to stay.

I also think that it is important to engage in conversations with critical friends. Throughout my research, I engaged in regular conversations with my head of department and senior leaders within the school to gain other insights into my research, to help understand my data and to hear from more experienced practitioners than myself. The Welsh Government (2010) talk of the dialogue that should be created by feedback which leads to the progress of the pupils. I also think this applies to teachers and that continuous conversations within and between departments and teachers as a whole are paramount if we are to progress. If practitioner research can potentially have a positive impact on the lives of pupils, I believe that we are doing them a disservice by not engaging in or sharing it.

By conducting this research, I have become more reflexive, evaluating and making changes in my practice through a greater understanding of the relationship between teacher, pupil and classroom context. I have become more proactive in talking to and sharing good practice across departments, I have become more aware of barriers to learning that pupils may face and I have also seen an impact within my department with the use of the

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scaffolding system in mainstream classes too. I have become responsible for KS3, and have continued to implement and develop tools that aim to make feedback and assessment more explicit and accessible.

I've not only seen an impact on my teaching in the classroom, but it has also given me the desire to continue to research and learn in order to provide pupils with the best learning experiences that I can.

Smith (2013: 4) advises that 'The Welsh Government should promote the use of the arts in helping to deliver improved numeracy and literacy, and in reducing the attainment gap.' I hope that by continuing to carry out and share research with other practitioners, the importance of the arts in the curriculum will continue to become more evident.

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*Notes*

- <sup>1</sup> The project was completed as part of the Masters in Educational Practice at Cardiff University.
- <sup>2</sup> The Literacy and Numeracy Framework (Welsh Government, 2013) and the Curriculum Cymreig (Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales, 2003) are both statutory requirements in Welsh schools.