

Assessment for learning: the use of feedback and portfolio

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General description ...

Actually, school's ultimate goal is to help all students to learn by *learning* (Delors *et al.*, 1996). This new approach to learning leads to a new culture of assessment (Dierick & Dochy, 2001). However, the dominant assessment practices are still widely based on judgement of the status of the student and the grades are still the key elements (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Torrance & Pryor, 2001). According to this situation, as it is ongoing in other countries of Europe (ex. Black *et al.*, 2003), we are developing in Portugal a project, Project AREA¹, the main objective of which is to understand what assessment practices can become a real learning tool. In this paper we focus on the following questions: (i) what are the main potentialities of feedback in assessment practices, particularly in the development of a production in two phases and in portfolio and (ii) what is the evolution of these assessment practices all along the project.

Assessment goes through gathering evidences, followed by its interpretation and finally in an action based on the hypothesis reached (Wiliam & Black, 1996). However, this type of assessment will only be truly a formative assessment if there are implications to the learning. Some particular practices may contribute to this learning process, such as, the feedback and portfolio as an alternative assessment instrument.

A key practice to assessment for learning is feedback. Feedback is perceived as the information that shows how apart is the “performed” from the “expected” in order to minimize that difference (Sadler, 1989). To considerer this difference is not entirely new (Bellanger, 1988); however, actually the error is seen as something inherent to the act of acknowledging itself. The recognition of the error is, by itself, a learning process (Meirieu, 1988). But being able to overcome an error demands a process of meta-knowledge, which can also be considered as a learning strategy (Santos, 2002). Not every assessment discourse guarantees a monitoring action. There are even some authors that distinguish two types of feedback: the *assessment feedback* and the *descriptive* one (Tunstall & Gipps, 1996; Gipps, 1999). Also, it is the quality and not just the quantity of feedback provided that deserves our attention (Sadler, 1998).

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Among the different assessment instruments, the portfolio must stand out as a way to make the students develop their reflection capacities on how and what they have just done, as well as to give them greater autonomy in decision making (Clarke, 1996; Wiliam, 2007).

Methodology

The project AREA has been developed for three school years. The project team includes researchers and teachers from pre-school to secondary school level. All of the research studies carried out until now followed an interpretative research methodology approach, namely action research methodology, and used, in general, case study design.

Research studies concerning feedback were developed by two mathematics teachers (one of them during a period of three years) from schools in different areas of Portugal. All along the three years, the participants were twelve students from middle school level (twelve to fourteen years old) that constituted the case studies. Another teacher developed, during three years, the use of portfolio with pre-school children (five years old).

The data was gathered through classroom observation and students' interviews (audio recorded) and documents produced by the students. The data analysis was conducted alongside the data collection and took the form of content analysis. The categories were constructed *a posteriori*, although shaped by the theoretical framework.

Results

The feedback of a descriptive nature (Gipps, 1999), contextualized by the task and with detailed directions as to how to proceed (Wiliam, 1999) is potentially more favourable to learning. Nevertheless not all feedback with these characteristics has the same positive effects regarding learning. The form of the comments as well their length, the type of student and his or her perceptions are factors that can influence the effectiveness of this assessment practice.

The use of portfolio in pre-school has been developed along the period of three years. Beginning with the purpose of permitting a shared analysis between the teacher and the children concerning their performance, a method of preparing a differential practice has been included. Children's identification and planning of future action to address their needs has been included in the third year (Wiliam, 2007).

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