

Tentative hypothesis

We are looking here at the generic skills used by teachers

Applicable in principle to all situations, contexts, groups of learners, and subject domains

Rationale for the English Improving Formative Assessment (IFA) Project

- No research on formative assessment in ABE or on effectiveness of education in part-time community-based settings
- High-profile government initiative – Skills for Life
- Evidence from other phases that benefits of formative assessment are greater for low-achievers

The 'Problem-based' research methodology

- A model for both research and continuing professional development of teachers
- Addresses danger of FA approach being seen merely as the application of techniques
- Emphasises the importance of the role of the 'expert' in teaching and learning

Elements of the 'Problem-based' research methodology

- Teachers' tasks and problems are mostly practical rather than theoretical: addressing them requires trial and error as much as instruction
- Empower the practitioner: 'What works' ultimately depends on the situation and the teacher's craft skills
- Feelings matter: behaviourist ideas are outdated in educational theory but still dominate the way that social policy is conceived, implemented and evaluated.

The OECD 5-step model from the perspectives of IFA

- A holistic perspective is vital: the steps are not discrete and do not necessarily take place in order
- IFA would also emphasise the PURPOSES of the FA approach:
 - To produce information for planning T&L, increasing the accuracy of its focus
 - To develop the autonomy and fluency of learners through authentic practice and self- and peer-assessment
 - to promote genuine engagement with a body of knowledge in a subject domain
- Systems for certification, performance measurement and accountability can both **help and hinder** FA in classrooms and workplaces: more research needed on this

Typical FA activities 1

- Clear differentiation between formative and summative assessment
- Dialogue between teachers and learners
- The use of communication skills at the highest level: seeding and managing purposeful discussion and debate
- Focussed, purposeful feedback and marking

Typical FA activities 2

- Use of a wide repertoire for questioning and checking current understanding of concepts and knowledge
- Summative assessment tools used formatively
- Developing and maintaining an atmosphere conducive to learning
- Peer- and self-assessment activities as normal elements of all learning

Typical FA activities 3

- Teaching the language and concepts of assessment: learning to assess quality
- Collaborative, investigative and conflictual learning activities (see Swan 2007)
- Activities aiming to improve motivation, confidence, autonomy and social participation

Teachers' approaches in the 'spirit' of FA

- Are easier to use with more homogeneous groups
- Are easier to use where there are more taught hours
- Require a clear understanding of FA
- Are supported when outcomes are defined more broadly

The 'letter' of FA likely to be found when

- The vulnerability of students is uppermost in teachers' and students' minds
- Students see the teacher's role as 'delivery' of their achievement
- Students join the class for reasons other than learning
- There is insufficient time to develop trusting relationships
- Relationships are not conducive to accepting risk, making mistakes, and self- and peer-assessment
- The teacher is mostly concerned to deliver an externally-defined curriculum
- The teacher does most of the talking, little purposeful interaction between students

Dangers

- FA is seen as a discrete intermediate stage in the learning process, whose sole purpose is to monitor progress towards narrow, short-term goals
- The FA approach becomes 'reified' as a series of mechanically-applied techniques
- Student activity and involvement is seen as sufficient in itself for effective and sustained learning: this denies the important role of the expert teacher

Strategies for adapting models to local contexts and individual learners

- Organise the professional development of teachers **formatively**:
 - Use a problem-based methodology
 - do not prescribe highly-specified and ‘reified’ techniques
- Leave it to teachers to adapt FA strategies to local needs

Successes and failures in implementation

- Wide range of teachers very positive about the findings of the project
- Teachers enthusiastic about the problem-based methodology as a model for professional development
- Policy perspective still dominated by need for high-stakes externally assessed qualifications which distort teaching and learning
- Learners' initial responses depend on their type of motivation – can be negative, though most are positive

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