

Climate Control



Create the right environment for student centred classroom assessment and children will drive their own learning, explains Paul Dix...

Effective classroom assessment is not driven by data but by conversations and critiques. It is owned by pupils and not served by teachers. Classroom assessment relies on children being empowered to take responsibility for assessing their work and that of others. It demands a level of risk, an adjustment in the role of the teacher and the confidence to place the child at the heart of decision making.

Productive assessment demands the right climate. A climate where there is no fear of an honest critique, where students can discuss each other's work without favour and where losing is learning, not laughed at.

The right climate starts with clear agreements, trust being given, assessment conversations clearly modelled and conduct routines underlined.

The natural prejudices of childhood and the emerging gender differences must not be

allowed to pervade learning conversations. This demands heightened awareness from children and adults. It requires that the boundaries are drawn with more clarity, 'Assess the work, not the person'. Limiting the scope of the conversation can stimulate more focused commentary. Limitation can be stimulation.

To get truly effective self, peer and group assessment conversations, contract the routines with the children. Display them prominently in words, pictures and icons. Run through them before each peer, group or self assessment activity. Paste them onto desks, scroll through them on the screen, create hanging mobiles with symbols. Etch them into the minds of the class

until they are utterly sick of being reminded. With determination, rigour and a large helping of persistence you can show children how to develop, explore and own assessment and target setting at the task level. Delivering accurate sensitive critiques on the work of others is a skill that can be learned and honed.

Hold on a second

GIVE CHILDREN SPACE TO LEARN...

Subtle communication between the student and the teacher makes it easier to judge when to intervene and when to leave the student to work independently. How many of us interrupt students and wish that we had left them working? Knowing when to stand back is as much of a skill as knowing when to intervene. Try mechanisms for instant feedback. Traffic light symbols: red for 'Help!', amber for 'I am getting on but have a question' and green for 'Leave me alone I am flying'. What about number sliders for showing how much confidence pupils have in the task? Ask the children to leave an indicator next to them while they are working and encourage them to take control of when, how and if they receive help.



Your role in climate change

It starts with our own behaviour. You set the climate for your classroom in behaviour and in learning. Modelling the 'Teacher as Learner' is the most important example that you can provide. It sets the right ethos for learning and honesty in the climate. Learn something new alongside your students. Let them see you learn and misunderstand, succeed and, most importantly, fail. Choose a topic that is as challenging for you as it is for the students – learning to juggle, designing a collage, building structures from straws, balancing an egg on your nose etc. You are an experienced and successful learner who has met the frustrations of learning and found strategies to overcome them. It is this model that most directly affects children's self esteem, resilience, attitudes to failure and comprehension of learning skills. It is this model that they look up to.

Your model of behaviour is also critical. 'Sit down, shut up and do your peer assessment', is unlikely to result in a productive, assessment conversation. Neither of course is, 'Danny why don't you take Claire's work to mark and try to forget that she stabbed you with a compass yesterday'.

As a teacher your role in promoting successful classroom assessment is not to standardise, to moderate. It is to refine, map, capture and guide ideas and language. By trying to control assessment you risk reducing

ownership, productivity and effectiveness. Top down targets and unsolicited advice don't work. Just think of how you react when, through observation, inspection and performance management you are disempowered. Children roll the same way.

The constructive emotional climate

There are some classrooms where failure is equated with fear and shame and others where there is an honesty about failure being part of learning. There are some classrooms where students are openly laughed at for their mistakes and others that are more forgiving of experimentation and failure.

For assessment to motivate, to encourage, to sustain interest and to engage it must search for what is right, what has been done well, what was successful in the first instance. Assessment that identifies primarily what is wrong is a short cut that demotivates, reinforces limited self-belief and teaches students to reflect primarily on what is going badly. Lessons they may well carry for the rest of their lives.

It is certainly easier, quicker and less effort to deconstruct and identify what is wrong. Effective teaching, however, rarely relies on quick and easy short cuts. For students who have a difficult history in education, who have grown used to failing assessments or who have failed without ever really understanding why, the constant search for what is wrong has a long term impact. Few people thrive in a climate where assessment conversations search for fault. Many find themselves conditioned to search for the same in others. The long term fall out is all around us in the adult world.

Emotionally intelligent assessment is the relentless search for the cup that is half full.

Assessment is personal. It is covered in layers of emotion, self doubt, arrogance, fear and excitement. Yet we want students to be able to reflect on their work without seeing a

