

Anthony Partington

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A reflection on action research into personalising learning through the use of academic planning interviews and the development of a film for *Teachers' TV*

Context

Assessment for Learning (AfL) has become increasingly important in state education. It is central to the Secondary (*formerly* Key Stage 3) National Strategy. In the materials prepared for senior leaders of secondary schools, the Assessment Reform Group's definition of AfL is promoted; it is:

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'.

(DfES, 2006, p.5)

As such, formative assessment and target setting are seen as key to the development of a personalised curriculum. The national agenda in education has moved in the recent past to thinking about:

- *How can we help every child do even better?*
- *What teaching practices should we employ to do so?*
- *How together can we solve the specific challenges faced in each school?*

(DfES, 2004, p.3)

A working party in Longsands College, St Neots felt that many of the key messages about Assessment for Learning had been incorporated into the curriculum. Targets were being set for a variety of reasons from improving writing to addressing behaviour and attendance problems. In English, students were developing how they might improve their writing against National Framework and departmental assessment focuses and objectives by putting together evidence-based portfolios and recording their most recent targets [*Resources 1&2*]. A target bank provided the focus for development in writing [*Resource 3*]. Similar initiatives were taking place in other subjects across the curriculum and within pastoral work though no co-ordinated policy existed.

It was felt that there was much *input* from the teacher and less work was being done to ask the students what they thought and to measure the impact upon their learning. Many staff felt that the target-setting was unproductive and that students found it difficult to carry around what one colleague labelled 'a rucksack full of targets'. There was little support to help students interpret and prioritise areas for development.

Black and William warn of the *black box* of teaching, in which constant pressure is applied to what happens in the classroom without any measure of impact. Teachers on the working party, including myself, felt that we needed to develop a system that allowed us to answer the questions:

What is happening on the inside? How can anyone be sure that a particular set of new inputs will produce better outputs if we don't at least study what happens on the inside?

(Black & William, 2001, p.1)

The working party felt that the best way to proceed was to develop a 'planning day', where students would be able to bring all of their targets together and rationalise them. By cutting the number of targets to between one and three, depending upon the child, it was possible for teachers and the students themselves to assess whether the target had made a difference. Data from the end of Key Stage tests and cognitive ability tests (CATs) seemed to be inappropriate for measuring the impact of the targets, as they are either too removed from the process of incremental development advocated by AfL, i.e. assessment is summative, or they are designed to test other skills, i.e. the ability to pass examinations rather than succeed in the classroom. Instead, I used the students' own assessment of their learning and that of their peers and classwork and homework marked in the normal manner. Details of which were recorded, so that students might chart their own progress on individual target sheets [Resource 2].

As part of the project, I was keen to film the process and to capture the thoughts of stakeholders: students, teachers, parents. This would be beneficial for evaluation of the project and also for the development of other staff. An extension of this development opportunity was the editing of some of the footage to create a five-minute film for *Teacher Video*, a Teachers' TV programme.

Planning the activity

Year 9 is a crucial in the life of a student. Due to the nature of the English education system's tendency to specialisation, young people are required to make decisions at 14 that often have an impact on their education, opportunities for lifelong learning and career choices. It seemed that this was the year group where the effects of these interventions might be measured most effectively and have most impact. Pupil data such as that provided by the Fischer Family Trust and school estimates based on CATs aided the target setting and would facilitate the assessment of whether new standards had been met in English. Students were given specific writing targets that related to them reaching the next National curriculum level of attainment [developed and achieved by using Resource 3].

Working with the students as a subject teacher of English, I would then follow their work through to the Academic Planning Day when they would bring together their targets from across the curriculum, of which I had no prior knowledge. I would be able to measure how effective the target setting was within my own subject and learn how other subjects were responding to the need to provide students with guidance towards the 'next steps'. I wanted to see the students move through the process and capture their development at each stage.

Acknowledging that this project had a number of purposes - evaluation, sharing 'good practice', in-school, national television - meant drawing on expertise from a variety of

fields. I had at first thought that the primary motive of the piece was to capture the 'student voice' and designed to follow four students from Year 9: two boys and two girls. After speaking to a television producer, I developed this idea to focus instead on just two boys. This decision meant that I was able to spend more time with a small number of students, who in turn were able to develop a productive working relationship, which would ultimately come to fruition in a later related project.

At the time of planning this project, concerns about the underachievement of boys continued to be prevalent. The choice of just boys meant that I was able to avoid the debate about gender. In this school there was some variance between the results of boys and girls, though not to any significant extent, nor were these figures consistent over the years, so that conclusions might be drawn about failings in the curriculum. In the year group that I intended to focus upon, there was a prediction that the boys might even outperform the girls at level 5+ in English, though they might not secure the higher levels [Table 1].

I was also steered here by what Ferrance has to say on identifying an area for research:

An important guideline in choosing a question is to ask if it something over which the teacher has influence. Is it something of interest and worth the time and effort spent?

(Ferrance, 2000, p.10)

Although, I did hold a position where I might be able to implement some of the whole-school organisational approaches to raising attainment as suggested in the University of Cambridge study *Raising Boys' Achievement* (Younger & Warrington et al, 2005a), I did not feel that gender was an issue and wanted to 'limit the question to one that is meaningful and doable in the confines of [my] daily work.' (Ferrance, Ibid.) The changes required to raise attainment for boys that focus on pedagogy and the individual in *Raising Boys' Achievement*, such as:

Teachers within subjects departments need time and support on a regular and frequent basis, to set targets for individuals within their classes, and to engage in professional dialogue about learning at the level of the individual child.

(Younger & Warrington et al, 2005b, p.6)

it seems are of relevance to all students and would benefit girls as much as they would benefit boys.

By speaking to a number of television professionals, I began to think that the project must also consider what makes 'good' television [ideas developed further in responses to *UCE questionnaire to participating teachers in Teacher Video*], if the film and the project were to be of relevance to a wider audience. It seemed that there was a need to focus on a few 'personalities', even though the project was working with a whole class. I chose two individuals on the basis of their attitude to learning rather than ability: engaged and eager versus passive and reluctant. I hoped that this would cover how a variety of students responded to the experience of talking about their learning. I was interested in the response of learners to the 'personalised' learning experience

and yet in order to share this experience with others, I would need to contextualise my reasons for researching this area, that is to say, I would have to 'tell the story'. It is for this reason that I later returned to the project to make a second film, which I entitled '*This time it's personal*' - *the student voice* and that I produced a 'how to' film for other teachers that was shown prior to the actual Academic Planning Day.

Carrying out and filming the activity

Details of the activity are to be found on the DVD [Teacher Video - *Making Learning Personal*] and in *UCE questionnaire to participating teachers in Teacher Video*.

Evaluating the activity and the next steps

Although some analysis of the results of the activity are to be found in *UCE questionnaire to participating teachers in Teacher Video* and in the videos themselves, below are other thoughts about the project.

'Good television' meant that it was necessary to re-shoot certain aspects of the film, which also allowed for continual evaluation and refinement of the project. By the time that the actual Academic Planning Day went ahead the two boys that featured in my film had been involved in several interviews about their learning. We were able to use the film at the actual Academic Planning day when all the students attended interviews to explain the process to parents. However, I was concerned that the boys involved had perhaps had a slightly different experience to everyone else in the project; it was more intense and therefore reinforced the aims in a more effective manner. In hindsight, it might have been better to have filmed more students, so that a range of perspectives were gathered and the focus on the two boys in the film did not detract away from the project's focus of improving the group.

Many students responded positively to the planning process. The two boys featured in the film were able to improve in English due to their focused targets. Ultimately, were to meet and exceed their predicted results. One boy moved from a mid-level 6 to a mid-level 7 and the other from a secure level 4 to a low level 5. Across the curriculum, teachers suggested that they were more engaged in their learning. However, the momentum after the first term seemed to dip; it was at this point that I set out to make a follow-up video.

The film was well received by the makers of the television programme and is still available to view on the *Teachers' TV* website at <http://www.teachers.tv/video/3165>. During the programme, I am seen evaluating the project alongside others. I mention in the programme that I would like to come back and see what change has happened. I was concerned that the process of videoing the boys may have had a distorting effect and any improvement was the result of the intense attention that they received whilst filming. Without that focus, I was concerned that they might slide backwards.

The confines of the film length meant that after 'telling the story' of the research there was little time to evaluate how the students had been affected. It was always our intention to reflect upon and build on the process. The first film suggested that

the process was ended and I feel that other teachers may have felt that there was little merit in the procedure. The filming schedule also meant that the 'evaluation' of the project was taking place two weeks after being set target, which was not long enough for them to take hold or fail. It was therefore too early to measure little more than if the boys had enjoyed talking about their targets.

In the second video '*This Time It's Personal*' - *the student voice*, (<http://www.teachers.tv/video/4895>) I set out to evaluate the project from the students' perspectives with the sole intention of making the programme about researching the effects of the project. As this was returning to the original 'story', I felt that there was less of a need to contextualise and more time was given to the evaluation and listening to the students, hence the title of the film. In this piece, I also wanted the students to feel as if they could say what they wanted about their attitudes. Although, I had encouraged the students to regard me in the interviews as an objective outsider, I felt that there was a certain degree of telling me what I wanted to hear - that the project had been useful to them and successful. As can be seen in the second video, it had to a certain extent, but there were many improvements to be made.

What I was able to do in the second video was develop the final piece in the project, which had been missing and that was to develop 'new ways to enhance feedback between those taught and the teacher' (Black & William, 2001, p.3). As Black and William correctly assert, the students were calling for 'significant changes in classroom practice' and 'the results ... be used to adjust teaching and learning' (Ibid.). Although happy with the experience, they wanted more opportunities to see an 'overview' of their learning, so that 'their own assessments become an object of discussion with their teachers' (Ibid., p.7). The close working relationship of the boys in the film might also suggest that there are opportunities for this to be extended to conversations with 'one another' in pairs or triads with a teacher/ mentor throughout the year rather than as a one-off annual event as 'this promotes even further that reflection on one's own ideas ... is essential to good learning (Ibid., p.7).

Such changes have been made in the Academic Planning process at the school, with students being offered half-termly meetings with their tutors. The information that the students were able to provide for me in the follow up to the project continues to inform my interest and work in this area at another school.

The two boys talking about each other as learners in the first video and interviewing each other about the impact of intervention on their learning in the second confirms what Black and others say:

Peer assessment is uniquely valuable because students may accept criticisms of their work from one another that they would not take seriously if the remarks were offered by a teacher. Peer work is also valuable because the interchange will be in language that the students themselves naturally use and because students learn by taking the roles of teachers and examiners of others.

(Black et al, 2004, p.14)

'Examination' here became 'interviewing' and as such might provide a model for future development of this project. Both boys constantly referred to the use of

cameras, as an incentive to be involved in the project and to work hard. They claimed that peers might think that they had had a different experience. I hope that this was the case and that the other students did not have a lesser experience. Many other students were seen to improve and from the whole group of 31 only two seemed to make no development in writing throughout the project. Although not used as a measure of the success of the project here, 90% of students met or exceeded their target grade based on Fischer Family Trust and CAT predictions.

It would, however, be interesting to investigate whether increasing the use of cameras in such a personal learning project would spread that incentive or dilute it. What might be drawn from this is that students are far happier expressing their ideas through the medium of television:

Children's basic understanding of the 'language' of television develops at a very young age. The fundamental 'vocabulary' of camera movements and positions, shot transitions and editing conventions is fairly well understood by most children by the age of four or five.

(Buckingham, 2005, p.14)

The 'grammar' that students possess in this area might mean that the development of the project sees what was merely a mode of disseminating the details of the project to other teachers changes role to a mode of monitoring and evaluation.

A criticism of the research might be my involvement at every stage. There is a sense that I might have manipulated, however unconsciously, the results, so that the project was successful. It was only after the period of reflection that the time between the filming of the videos afforded, that I realised that there was a lot of 'me' and not too much of the students' voices in the project. By freeing these, I was able to develop the methods used. The camera and the ability to film the development of students and to chart their voice as the changes take place might become the vehicle that ensures the process is truly personal. It might also have been used to make the research more objective. From the outset, the students ought to have been given the opportunity to make a bigger contribution to the research methods. By imposing my ideas upon the creation of the project, I was guilty of not listening to the students. The project appeared to be successful, because it met the criteria that I had created.

Black and William warn:

The dialogue between pupils and a teacher should be...conducted so that all pupils have an opportunity to think and to express their ideas.

(Black & William, 2001, p.8)

In the first film, one student stood out as being positive about the project. The other was hesitant and seemed to go along with what was said. However, in enabling the students to make their own parts of the second film and therefore provide more evaluative comments, there appeared to be a reversal. The questioning that the students made of each other was probably less daunting than speaking to me and produced more formative results and suggestions. Interestingly, the hesitant student not only made comments about the need for development of the project, but also filmed the formerly confident student thereby providing him with the opportunity to

present his ideas. It seemed that the boys always had opinions about the project, but one was better at speaking to an adult and answering his questions than the other. In the future, I ought to give more thought to the fact that some students in research as well as in the classroom need other ways to express themselves. Whilst I have responded in the way that I teach, by altering my classroom practice, I did not at first consider the students enough in the planning of my research and in the methods I created to gather my findings.

The second film and my evaluation (and perhaps disappointment with the findings in the first) allowed me to develop this project so that it continues to be of use to the staff in at least two Cambridgeshire schools; it might therefore be pertinent to add:

Increasing the wait times can help more students become involved in discussions and increase the length of the replies.

(Black et al, 2004, p.12)