How formative assessment develops student learning and informs a tutor’s teaching: A case study in action research.

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Abstract

The literature on formative assessment suggests students’ learning is enhanced when the procedures involve self, peer and tutor assessment (triadic assessment). This action research project investigates and reports on how triadic formal formative assessment procedures, self, peer and tutor feedback on students draft assignments, impacted on student learning and informed a tutor’s teaching.

The project aimed to contribute to the existing knowledge on formative assessment processes and procedures on the learning of a specific group of students and inform the teaching of their tutor. The data were collected from self, peer and tutor feedback, focus group discussions, reflective journals and questionnaires. The thematic analysis of the findings describes how student participation in the procedures developed and improved learning for some of the student group especially for lower achievers. Information for tutor teaching highlighted the importance of establishing the meaning of the assessment criteria and writing constructive feedback.

This project points to difficulties with students’ misunderstandings of formal formative assessment procedures and demonstrates the value of tutor learning through the action research process as a professional development tool.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Several authors argue that formative assessment can impact on the learner (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Boud, 1991; Broadfoot, 2002). In this study I investigate how self, peer and tutor feedback as formative assessment procedures can develop and improve student learning and lead to informed tutor teaching.

I am employed as a tutor in a small college of early childhood education where my role is third year tutor and Dean for students enrolled in the Diploma of Teaching (Early Childhood Education). This project explores the ways formative assessment procedures develop student teacher learning and inform the tutor’s teaching during the final year of study for the 2005 student group who were participants in this project.

The Context of Early Childhood Teacher Education within New Zealand

In the late 1980s the New Zealand Labour Government began a series of changes to the public sector. These were ‘driven by an economic ideology that devolved responsibility for service delivery yet retained fiscal control’ (Te One, cited in Nuttall, 2003, p. 19). The education sector’s reformation began with a series of administration reforms in primary and secondary education. Early childhood was next. A working party headed by Dr Anne Meade was set up to investigate the role of early childhood education. In 1988 ‘Education to be More’ was published (The Meade Report), followed by ‘Before Five’ a “statement of intent for early childhood care and education” (Lange, 1988, p. iii). These influential and important reports brought early childhood education into the public eye, giving “early childhood the same status as primary and secondary education and was sanctioned by David Lange,” (Te One, cited in Nuttall, 2003, p. 21). These documents led to the development of the first national early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki, published in 1996. This document presented a framework for curriculum and required early childhood teachers to be, “skilled at implementing curriculum” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 27). Teachers had to weave their own curriculum programme guided by this non-prescriptive framework. This was difficult in a sector, which had ‘large numbers of untrained or poorly trained staff” (May, 2002, p. 247). Adults who worked with young children were going to have to undertake extensive professional development if they were to
implement the curriculum's intent and understand 'the key principle that learning is embedded in social and cultural contexts,' (Cullen, 2003, cited in Nuttall, 2003, p. 285).

In 1995 the government opened doors to teacher education providers outside the state sector with an increase in the number of private providers who were entitled to the same funding levels as the state providers (May, 2002). Degrees and diplomas of teaching in early childhood education were offered and it was during this time that our college sought approval to offer a diploma of teaching, and began the process of writing and implementing a curriculum for the Diploma of Teaching in Early Childhood Education.

It is this context that makes this project possible.

**The Research Question**

The purpose of this project was to explore the ways formative assessment procedures could develop students' learning and inform my teaching practice as a tutor. This study will contribute to the existing knowledge on formative assessment and demonstrates the significance of the assessment processes and procedures on the learning of a specific group of student teachers.

The main research question asks: how do formative assessment procedures develop student learning and inform tutor-teaching practices?

The following supplementary questions support the main question.

- How do the students use formative assessment procedures to develop and improve learning?
- What are the tutor's understandings of the ways formative assessment can be used to develop and improve learning?
- What were the critical issues?

*Background to the Research Topic*

My interest in assessment and assignment tasks developed from experiences as a student when I began to notice the ways in which assignments were assessed, and to understand that learning was enhanced when the assessor’s feedback on the script was understood and implemented to improve the assignment. Feedback was of further significance when the assessor discussed and further clarified it. In 2004 I enrolled in a master's paper on assessment in education and became interested in the assessing process, especially reading how formative assessment could be used as a tool to improve
student learning. Therefore the opportunity for this project to explore the effects of formative assessment procedures on student and tutor learning was a chance to investigate the effects through an action research approach.

Chapter 2 Review of Literature

Introduction

“Assessment is the most powerful policy tool in education. Not only can it be used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of individuals and institutions and indeed whole systems of education, it can also be used as a powerful source of leverage to bring about change” (Broadfoot, 1996, p 21).

There is a wide range of literature pertaining to formative and summative assessment in tertiary education. This review begins with the definition and purposes of formative assessment and then reviews the effects of formative assessment by self, peer and tutor in developing and improving student learning. The role of the tutor is discussed and details of the strengths and weaknesses of formative assessment procedures are explored. The review concludes with a summary of the main points.

Summative and Formative Assessment

In tertiary education a variety of assignment tasks evaluate students’ learned achievements, which are usually assessed as summative pieces of work. The assessment task aims to summarise a student’s achievement of the studied subject focusing on what the student has learned. Summative assessment involves “taking a sample of what students do, making inferences and estimating the worth of their actions” (Brown, Bull and Pendlebury 1997, p. 8).

Formative assessment is concerned with facilitating the process for learning. Black & Wiliam (1998a), report that formative assessment does not have “a tightly defined and widely accepted meaning’ (p. 2) but in their extensive review of the literature define the term as “all those activities undertaken by teachers and or their students, which provides information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” (Black & Wiliam, 1998a, p.2).
Yorke (2003) says it is a very complex idea and suggests it includes practices, which are both “formal and informal” (p. 477).

Crooks (2001) promotes formative assessment’s purpose as “further improvement of student attainment” (p. 1), with the emphasis on the learning process, while Knight (2002) considers formative assessment is “characterised by listening and exchange with as little imbalance of power as possible” (p. 284). Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and Wiliam (2004) contend that if formative assessment is for learning, then to facilitate learning the tool is the assessment activity and when feedback is utilised so both student and teacher use it to adapt, ‘teaching work to learning needs’ then assessment is formative (Black et al. 2004, p. 10). Black & Wiliam (1998a), suggest learning occurs when the teacher intervenes and challenges a student to identify the gaps between what they need to know, where they are currently, and how to lessen the gap to achieve the desired outcome. This requires a teacher’s significant understanding of how an assessment task engages the student in learning, and the learning process is complemented if the teacher’s feedback messages are easily understood.

When students engaged with formative assessment procedures, Boud (1991) claims, they became self-directed autonomous learners who could reflect, appraise and take responsibility for their own learning. Black & Wiliam (1998a) report that noteworthy learning gains for students (and teachers) only occurred when teachers knew how to implement the process. They report that formative assessment was not understood by many teachers because of their beliefs about the teaching role, implying formative assessment only develops student learning when the teacher focuses on the student learning process.

The teacher who focuses on student learning is advised to ensure the classroom culture is a climate for success, with assessment practices which ensure a student learns to think, plan, reason and make decisions while solving the assessment problem. Maclellan (2004) believes “task driven performance should not be a significant part of educational assessment” (p. 315) maintaining that the selected task must assess knowledge or skills.

However for formative assessment to succeed, teachers using this approach as described by Broadfoot (2002), must accept they are learners committed to learning and must “become empowered, reflective and active learners, rather than passive respondents to external dictates” (p. 6). When teachers accept that learning is an ongoing lifelong process, which they actively seek and question and change accepted practices, they then empower themselves and also their students.
Formative Assessment Procedures

Triadic Assessment
Many authors (Black & Wiliam 1998a; Orsomond, Merry & Reiling 1997; Fallows & Chandramohan 2001; Tarras 2001; Tarras 2003; Gale, Martin & McQueen 2002) argue that formative assessment in tertiary education is most beneficial when it is implemented as a triadic procedure. There are many variations on how triadic assessment is implemented; however its essence is feedback.

Feedback
Constructive feedback is considered central to all formative assessment procedures, as when it is understood and applied appropriately learning is enhanced.

Gale et al (2002) suggests that triadic assessment should involve students and tutor decisions about the assessment criteria, however their study reveals that the participants were aged 32-62, all had some teaching qualifications or were experienced teachers. Perhaps it could be assumed that experienced teachers who have had some practice at writing assessment criteria could do this with limited training although this was not acknowledged. Boud (1999) also contends students should be involved in determining the assessment criteria but concedes there are some areas where this may not be practicable. Time constraints might make this impractical in tertiary courses, as undergraduates would require considerable guidance and training. Dochy & Segers, (2001) and Fallows & Chandramohan (2001), suggest that when students are given training in how to assess, they gain significant learning benefits, but Hanrahan & Issacs, (2001), who did not teach their large group of 225 students how to assess, also record many positive effects on students learning.

Self Assessment
Self assessment, Boud (1999) argues, requires that students be involved in deciding “what is good work in any given situation,” (p. 2) and Boud suggests that students should notice and recognise the qualities of best practice and apply them to the work as these are the essential aspects of self-assessment. Fallows and Chandramohan (2001) believe self-assessment requires a student to “undertake an honest and self-critical reflection on his or her own work” (p. 232), emphasising that this personal perspective is different from peer and tutor assessment. While Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2004) say that the most important aspect of self-assessment is when a
student engages and learns how to identify the assessment criteria in their work and judge how it measures against the criteria. This approach could be criticised for focusing the student’s attention on the task rather than on developing and improving learning, implying that what is written as assessment criteria enhances student’s deeper learning.

Self assessment cannot be effective if the student does not understand the assessment criteria. Tarras, (2001; 2003) and Black & Wiliam (1998b) recommend students are provided with a clear picture of the assignment's learning outcomes while Black et al (2004) say the learning goal can only be achieved when a student understands what “they need to do to reach it” (p. 14). Black & Wiliam (1998b), suggest teachers persist and carefully ensure that each student sees the goal, as the effort will develop students who are committed learners. Although students in a study by Gale et al (2002) initially reported some concerns and disliked self assessment but they also said they could see its benefits. These researchers later found as students became practiced with the procedures it significantly encouraged them to engage in making decisions about their abilities and achievements.

Peer Assessment.

Peer assessment is promoted as having many learning benefits when part of triadic assessment. A peer within the same learning group and of similar academic status assesses another peer’s draft assignment by writing relevant feedback according to the assessment criteria (Fallows and Chandramohan, 2001). This procedure can help students to see others’ perspectives and as Ballantyne, Hughes, & Mylonas (2002), reported, students in their study gained valuable insights into their work which guided them to “make a realistic assessment of their own abilities providing them with valuable skills to use in the future” (p. 435). Assessing their peers’ efforts encouraged comparison and reflection on their own work. They recommended awarding marks for participation in peer assessing, as this supports students’ engagement and commitment to the task. Fallows and Chandramohan (2001) argued however that some students questioned the benefits of peer assessment as it inevitably pushed students into a competitive role against each other. Gale et al. (2002) found students’ truthful feedback had to be balanced against future relationships with peers. Students who were at first concerned, discovered when they constructively peer assessed, their concerns dissipated and they gained knowledge and deeper understanding of their work (Gale et al. 2002; Rust, Price & O’Donovan, 2003).
Fallows and Chandramohan (2001) contend that if someone in the learning group has advanced knowledge of a subject it cannot be assumed, and say that the peer assessor will focus on other criteria. Hanrahan and Isaacs’ (2001) study included anonymous peer assessors, which would be beneficial if it could be achieved but difficult within a small student group. These writers omitted to describe why they considered anonymity important. Perhaps if the peer is unknown to the peer assessor then the feedback is constructive, as the assessor is more likely to address the work rather than writing to please the peer.

*Tutor Feedback*

The tutor’s role in the triadic procedure is to write constructive feedback about the draft work. Several writers (Black & William, 1988a, 1988b; Carless, 2002; Tarras, 2001, 2003; Weendon, 2000) argue that effective feedback occurs when the tutor ensures the student understands the intent and puts that understanding to good use. Boud (1995) suggests that some teachers are better than other teachers in giving constructive feedback. What students need is information that is user friendly, addresses their progress and suggests what to do to improve their work. There must be a mutual understanding of the feedback, which should encourage the student to think about what was said and to seek further clarification if necessary (Brown & Knight, 1994; Orsmond et al., 1997).

As of 2005 I could find no literature on specific guidelines for what constructive feedback looks like but Knight (2002) urges educators to “explore assessment as complex systems of communication, as practices of sense and claim making” (p. 285). This indicates commitment to the assessment process engaging both tutor and student in careful examination and co-construction of meaning. Stefani (1998, p. 346, cited in Carless, 2002, p. 355) remarks that “a short series of comments, usually of simple praise or blame” is not what students want. They need user friendly information, specifically about how they are doing and what they need to improve. Precise and clear feedback will facilitate students’ deep learning especially when it encourages debate and discussion with others. However Weendon’s (2000) investigation of student interpretation of tutor feedback found that students often misinterpreted the tutor’s comments. She warns tutors to take particular care with comments ensuring students understand the intent of the message.

Tarras (2001, 2003) reports that constructive feedback is valued by students and suggests that without it, students would not be aware of all their mistakes. Weimer (2002) attributes feedback as having significant impact on students and advises very busy tutors with large numbers of students to try to make the comments meaningful.
Conclusion

The review of the literature suggested that formative assessment is beneficial to students learning when it is understood and implemented as a triadic procedure. The literature reported that tutor constructive feedback was the essence in the procedures.

Self-assessment was reported to engage students more deeply with the work and therefore encouraged thinking and deeper learning.

While peer assessment could be difficult, the literature generally suggested it was a worthwhile process.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Introduction

This chapter describes and explains the project’s methodology. It includes a description of the research design and the background to the project. Data sources and details of the data analysis process are explained. Ethical considerations and issues are discussed.

Research design

The research design followed an action research approach. This approach “starts from the idea that research should do more than understand the world: it should help change it” (Hill and Capper, 1999, p. 243). Mills (2003, p. 8) suggests the key concepts within action research are, “participatory and democratic,” “socially responsive” and occur in context where the teacher researcher concentrates on “taken for granted” teaching practices, using the acquired information to enhance “learning and teaching and policy making.” Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000, p. 30) suggest, that critical educational research aims to unravel the accepted understanding of ways of doing/knowing through investigation, and then reconstructs these understandings in light of the findings. Simple action research process is implemented in cycles of plan, act, do and re-plan. Various diagrammatic models are used to describe different approaches to action research. Mills (2003) illustrates some of these models e.g. Lewin’s Action Research Cycle and Action Research Interacting Spiral. The researcher develops an appropriate model, adapting existing models to suit the focus for investigation. An action plan is implemented and information is gathered on the effects of the action. At the end of the cycle the interpreted information is developed into another action plan and a new cycle begins (McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead, 2002).
I used the terminology of ‘The Dialectic Action Research Spiral’ (Figure 1), created by Mills (2003, p. 19), for this project and developed a cyclic model (Figure 2) using this language. Within each loop of my model data sources were gathered as detailed below, analysed, interpreted and developed into an action plan for the next loop. The loops revolve around an area of focus.

![Dialectic Action Research Spiral](image)

**Figure 1** from Mills (2003, p.19). Model of Dialectic Action research Spiral.

**Early Developments**
At the start of the project I worked in collaboration with my students to develop an understanding of how formative assessment procedures developed and improved learning. (learning about the targeted curriculum content for the students and learning about ways in which formative assessment developed and improved learning for both myself and the students). At the beginning of the project I drew a very rough Venn diagram to represent my planned action. This complex diagram was drawn as a framework for the project and shows the outline of plans for the focus of the formative assessment, procedures, the data sources and collection dates within the three loops. (The draft of this model is shown in Appendix A).
Figure 2: Cyclic Model
The college’s curriculum is divided into strands. Three strands were used to frame each loop with each strand’s assignment targeted for the formative assessment procedures. The strands were *Educational Studies in Human Development and Learning, Diversity Studies and Professional Development*. Two of the assignments were literature reviews and one was a research report. The targeted assignments had two due dates, one for formative assessment of the draft assignment and the other for the summative assessment of the assignment.

At the beginning of the year I discussed with the student group the importance of self directed study and how to manage course requirements. I also gave them information about working in a study group, asking them to meet regularly. At the end of the discussion they decided on study group members, giving me a list of member’s names.

In the first loop the student group read and discussed the benefits of formative assessment procedures as a familiarisation process. I suggested they discuss these in their study groups but did not ask them to undertake any specific training.

In each loop triadic procedures were used in conjunction with the targeted assignment. Each student self assessed their work using the assignment’s assessment criteria (Appendix B) as a guide for self-checking, and wrote on the assessment criteria sheet how they believed they met the criteria. The student group asked a peer to assess their assignment in the same way before handing the draft assignment in for tutor feedback.

**Participants**
The participants were the entire third year student group, who were completing the final year of study for the Diploma of Teaching in Early Childhood in the small early childhood college where I teach. The student group were eleven Year 3 women student teachers, aged between twenty and forty years. My role was as tutor and also an active participant investigating my teaching practice.

**Data Sources.**
In chapter four I report on the detail of three primary sources of data and others as described below.

*Primary Data Sources.*

- *Self assessment feedback:* the comments written by each of the eleven students as an assessment of their own assignment. They were collected as data from each loop. \(3 \times 11 = 33\) items.
• **Peer assessment feedback:** the comments written on a peer’s assignment by each of the eleven peer assessors, which were collected as data from each loop. (3 x 11 = 33 items).

• **Tutor feedback:** my written comments on each of the eleven students’ assignments at the formative stage. These comments were collected as data in each of the three loops. (3 x 11 = 33 items).

**Other Data Sources**

• **Recorded transcribed focus group discussions:** Three, thirty minute audio taped transcribed discussions were collected as data and given to participating students for authentication. These focus group discussions were held at the beginning of loop two, the end of loop two and the end of loop three. (3 x 1 = 3 sets of data). The first two discussions had three student volunteers in each group and the last group had five students. Two of the students in this last group had participated in the first discussion.

• **Reflective journals:** Students were asked to include their impressions of formative assessment as part of reflective practice in their reflective journals. Journals are a course requirement and were incorporated into the study design. They were handed in on pre-selected dates and entries relevant to formative assessment were photocopied.

• **Focused written questions:** Students were asked to complete two questionnaires. One at the end of the first loop and the other in retrospect following graduation. (Appendices C, D).

• **Research Journal comments:** I kept a research journal throughout the project and used relevant comments from this journal as evidence of my earlier thinking.

**Ethical Procedures**

I applied to the Christchurch College of Education’s Ethical Clearance Committee for approval to undertake this project. I had planned for the project to begin at the beginning of the college teaching year, but delay in obtaining consent meant I had to undertake normal tutor teaching duties following my action plan, but was unable to get participant consent or begin to collect formal data until later than planned.

When approval was obtained I applied for consent to the academic committee of the college in which I am employed. The approval was granted with the provision that I submitted my request to the governing umbrella Executive Team for final consent, which was granted.
I discussed the project with the participants and supplied information forms and individual consent forms, which all participants signed before participating in the project (Appendix E).

In my roles as dean, tutor and researcher I took care to ensure ethical considerations were clearly understood by the student group. Each student was given a participant information sheet, which was read and discussed in class. The student group were told that their real names would not be used in the project and if necessary they could choose their own pseudonyms. Because of my dual role as researcher and tutor I took great care to explain procedures in detail and to assure the student group their concerns were important. They understood that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time, which in no way would jeopardise their course of study or results. It was explained that if they had any concerns or complaints they could contact my supervisor. They were asked to take time to read the information and to ask questions.

They discussed what the informed consent form meant and I suggested that they should carefully consider before signing.

Students chose pseudonyms, which are, used in examples from the focus group discussions, questionnaire and journal extracts.

**Data Analysis**

The process I used to analyse the data resulted, eventually, in my identifying a key theme to match each triadic procedures in each loop. These themes grounded my data. At the end of each loop I sorted the four primary data sources into sections under self, peer and tutor including the transcribed focus group discussions. I first concentrated on the triadic procedures. The data analysis in the first two loops involved looking for information, which would tell me about my teaching and the student group’s learning. In the first step I hand wrote and headed up three blank pages self, peer and tutor, drawing two columns on each page, one for the raw data (specific feedback comments) and one for my comments as I read and re-read the words trying to make sense of what I was seeing (Appendices F, G, H). I recorded all the relevant comments in the left column according to each specified heading. In the right hand column were suggestions for some initial categories and themes. As categories emerged I highlighted these groups of words in the same colour, writing memos for each data source and suggesting initial themes. The typed transcribed focus group discussions had a column drawn on the right hand side of the pages for hand written comments. I first read and re-read each page writing comments as ideas came to mind. The transcript was coded using a different coloured highlighter for groups of words, which suggested they belonged to the categories of self, peer and tutor. Words that
did not come under these categories were given the code ‘other ‘and allocated another colour. These three categories helped me to see emerging individual understanding about the formative assessment procedures.

In the second step I typed up sets of tables for each loop labelling each table with the primary data source e.g. ‘interpretation of self-assessment loop one.’ The columns were sub headed and the rows had the initial themes followed by examples and explanations. (Appendix I). This sorting into tables was important because by clarifying the themes I thought more deeply about issues and implications even though I later reduced these themes, as described in chapter four, the ideas remained important to my thinking.

At the completion of the three data gathering loops I re-examined all the data to clarify the patterns and trends across the whole project. I wrote ideas on pieces of paper trying to make more sense of each grouping, reducing and recoding my initial themes. From this deeper analysis I formulated my themes: the results appear in chapter four.

The initial analysis of the second focus group discussion did not reveal useful information relating to the formative assessment procedures, however when writing up this project other issues emerged from these focus group findings. It was only at this late stage did I become aware that I tended to offer opinions over the student voice.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings. These begin with loop one and spiral into loops two and three. The thematic interpretation of the analysed data is supported with examples and set out in each loop. At the completion of each loop, the findings are synthesised into an action plan, which form the next loop.

Loop One.
The assignment for the strand, Educational Studies in Human Development and Learning, was a literature review. This was the first assignment for the group and required considerable engagement in a specific writing technique.
Self-assessment “Testing the Water.”

‘Testing the water’ describes the student group’s first attempt with self assessment. They cautiously tested this procedure as they applied the new skill to their assignments.

Several students limited their self assessment to the structural aspect of the assignment and did not consider the content. I was somewhat dismayed by the feedback. The content area of the assessment criteria were largely ignored although comments were added to show it was attempted. It was difficult to find constructive feedback, which showed how they had met the assessment criteria. I resolved to carefully go over what the assessment criteria meant and to provide examples.

In my research journal I wrote

March 21, “oh dear I thought it would all go together smoothly, how wrong I was. There is never enough time to fully develop or explore the idea behind ideas, - self and peer assessment! Some were so keen to hand in their work they didn’t read the papers or the task and I am so disappointed that they have only glanced at the assessment criteria.

There was a diverse range of learning achievements within the student group. Many had to learn what the assessment criteria meant and how to apply them to their assignment. Although they had been given relevant readings with the assignment it did not appear as though they read them.

Peer assessment “Judged by ones peers?”

‘Judged by ones peers,’ attempts to explain the difficulties encountered by this group in writing meaningful feedback about their peer’s assignment. It seemed they were afraid that group members would judge them and that the judgement could alienate them.

It emerged that the students were concerned that if they wrote statements, which could be misconstrued, their peers would judge them and this might have undesirable results, for example relationship issues.

Constructive feedback was limited, they wrote short praise statements. For example

“Fantastic,” ”good standard,” ”great assignment.

There were close friendships and social activities within the group, which might explain their reluctance to give effective feedback. I resolved to investigate this in the focus group discussion.
Tutor feedback “Technical Signposting Was Not Constructive.”

“Technical signposting was not constructive,” discusses the tutor’s feedback as unhelpful for informing students on how to improve and develop the assignment. Terms were revealed which were not fully explained. For example “APA conventions,” “lead in statements,” “acknowledge information source.” This resulted in a negative experience for the student group. I missed opportunities to develop student learning.

Many feedback comments were authoritarian and technical with little explanation.

Although some of the student group understood and applied the feedback to their summative assignment it emerged that several of the lower achieving students did not understand the feedback terms. I needed to teach the language.

These comments were recorded in my research journal during the summative marking.

“April 2005: I so wanted them to have improved and kept looking for how they applied the formative feedback to their work. The grammar, spelling and referencing conventions improved but they hadn’t looked at the exemplars (apart from a few) as I suggested. Was pleased to see some had followed up on my feedback but the in depth stuff was ignored (too difficult?) Took me ages to mark must get this down to a systematic process.

Feedback time was emerging as an issue for me, and I wanted to look at this more carefully. I was surprised and a little worried when two students approached me about “re-submits” for their summative assignment. One was very indignant and tearful, she said it was my marking as previous years tutors marked her very highly. She considered she was right and I was wrong. She asked, "Why bother with the formative if there was just as much work on the resubmitted summative?" This highlighted two issues for me, that I should have acknowledged the students’ consistent successful past experiences of assessment, and to think deeply about my feedback messages in the formative cycle.
Focus *Group Discussion, Journal and Questionnaire “Experiences and Realisations.”*

*Experiences and realisations,* explain individual student’s experiences of the formative assessment procedures, and showed when they began to understand how the procedures had developed and enhanced learning.

The first focus group discussion involved three self-selected students, Emma, Paige and Francesca. Their experiences of self assessment were similar and they discussed how they used it to check their work. Experiences of peer assessment were mixed. Emma found her experience of the procedure offended her, and she reported “I don’t want to make anyone feel like that,” while Francesca referred to someone in the group who was “higher up” “someone with more knowledge doing their degree.” She was suggesting she had nothing to contribute as a peer assessor. This assumption of incompetence raises enormous difficulties for giving peer assessment.

Although these three students reported positive experiences of tutor feedback I found that many of the summative assignments required re-submits. Tutor feedback terms were issues to be addressed. Another issue emerged during the transcription of this focus group discussion; I was horrified to find my opinion over-riding the voice of a student whom I’d had difficulty in understanding. I clearly heard in the transcription what she meant, but during this discussion I had not heard.

**Synthesis of Loop One Findings**

If the procedures were to develop and improve student learning, the group needed to understand how to use the assessment criteria. This would require allocated class time and a discussion on why peer-assessment was seen as a judgement of the peer rather than a constructive evaluation of the work.

The issue of tutor feedback terms, which had not been experienced in the previous years, required further written explanations and I needed to stand back and listen to individual students.

Acknowledging past assessment experiences should be addressed and noted for 2006.

Tutor feedback messages must be carefully written so the reader will not misinterpret them.

The first three weeks of the year were very busy and the first targeted assignment along with the formative assessment readings were handed out during this time. There was too much information to assimilate then. It would be better to do this nearer the time the assignment was due.
Action Plan for Loop Two.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tutor Self Evaluation</th>
<th>Proposed Tutor Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Write feedback, which is constructive, and cannot be misinterpreted.</td>
<td>Discuss with college director how to address literacy standards and importance of consistent assessment criteria across year groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarify technical jargon with explanation of terms.</td>
<td>Allocate class time to discuss formative procedures and using the assessment criteria. Discussion re judging peers/constructive feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide more opportunities for individual tutorials for clarification of feedback.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledge past assessment experiences.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Implemented Actions in Loop Two

As a result of these initial findings I met with the college director to discuss some of the issues revealed during this first loop. I was concerned with the student group's literacy standards and the director suggested a session with a specialised literacy tutor. Examination of the assessment criteria for the next targeted assignment revealed several discrepancies and adjustments were made. From this, attention was drawn to many assignments and assessment criteria across the year groups and the director developed a proforma assignment and assessment template for all assignments. Another issue for the student group was that although students were expected to undertake self-directed learning as promoted in the curriculum this student group appeared to want to be spoon fed.

Class time was allocated to a discussion on the meaning of the assessment criteria and its application to the next assignment. The difficulties with peer assessment were highlighted to establish that constructive feedback was of work, not of the student. Students who needed clarification of tutor feedback were encouraged to bring their formatively assessed assignments to a tutorial. I began to notice when I interrupted conversations and tried to stand back and listen.
Loop Two


"Ways of understanding," describes significant developments and improvement to the students group’s second assignment, which was a literature review for the strand, Diversity Studies. Everyone now used the self-assessment procedure with deeper understanding, self-correcting work as they applied the assessment criteria and discovered gaps.

The specialised tutor had explained literacy techniques and encouraged the student group to apply these to their assignment. Several students developed deeper understanding of the criteria and technical jargon, which they applied to the assignment with qualified statements about the ways they had applied the procedure. Structural aspects improved in particular the content and understanding of the topic. Many began to understand and notice sections to improve and ways to develop the assignment explaining through their feedback how they thought they had developed and improved the assignment while acknowledging difficulties in meeting the criteria. In particular lower achieving students began to recognise and notice how to develop and improve their assignments.

Peer Assessment. "Encouraged By Peers and Some Useful Advice."

"Encouraged by peers and some useful advice," demonstrates that for some students, peer assessment was especially useful as an understanding of constructive feedback developed. Those students who undertook peer assessment wrote constructive, although at times still judgemental comments. This was encouraging; at least some of the student group undertook to peer assess constructively. However others seemed to resent it. Several students had heavy commitments outside of course requirements including paid work and sport. It was expected peer assessment would occur within their study groups, but reading for the assignment and discussion about topics was enough commitment for these students.
Tutor Feedback. “Constructive Comments.”

“Constructive comments,’ explains the improvement to tutor feedback which was more empathetic and offered further explanations.

Appropriate feedback encouraged thinking. I acknowledged efforts and qualified technical terms. For example “please look at your referencing. It must follow APA style. Check out how to reference appropriately. Look in the referencing handbook,” Feedback was user friendly with suggestions for developing and improving the assignment.

My journal showed some of the feedback dilemmas:

June 2005. “I wonder about giving students too much support. I have in my mind as I mark their achievements and I try to scaffold via my feedback e.g. if I know she has a slight learning problem then I write in language I think she will understand. What might others think of this?”

The issue of the amount of support given to students has emerged as an ongoing question for me. The journal comment about ‘others’ was in relation to the student group. The project highlighted tutor feedback, as I was aware of students comparing feedback on the second assignment.

At the end of this second loop another focus group discussion was held at my house one winter evening. It was a cold night and although one student forgot to turn up, the recording was made with three self-selected students Cindy, Clarissa and Charlotte (self chosen names).

Although only a few students used their journals to write about the procedures, some extracts are included here as they provided some insight into the effects of formative assessment on specific students.

Focus Group Discussion; Journal Writings. “Talking And Writing Clarifies Some Thinking.”

‘Talking and writing clarifies some thinking,’ discusses some of the effects of formative assessment on individual students. These initial findings were synthesised into the action plan, which was implemented in loop three. However a re-examination of this data source during the writing of this project highlighted third year course difficulties, which are also discussed.

This group expressed concerns about committing to formative assessment procedures. Charlotte thought that it was too much and referred to the extra time it took to peer and self assess.
However Cindy and Charlotte reported that the procedures made them engage with the assessment criteria and they also learnt the way an assignment was structured. They said that tutor feedback was sometimes hard to interpret but it got easier as they began to understand what the language meant. This was at the end of the second loop and tutor feedback terms had been discussed in class and they had experienced feedback on two assignments.

Paige and Emma's journal extracts described how a discussion helped to make sense of what they were doing, Paige wrote,

“When we started to talk about it, it made me realise (sic) just how helpfully (sic) the formative assessment is to me. It gives me a second chance to pass it the first time and not to keep resubmitting.”

The re-examination of the focus group discussion transcription highlighted some of the student group’s difficulties with the third year course. Although all student year groups were expected to use the college library for this group it appeared to be difficult. The third year of study required students to use the two education libraries they belonged to but they liked handouts to read and did not want to investigate further. Clarissa said that in previous years handouts had been given “it wasn’t like you were going out and finding the work yourself.” I wondered if this spoon feeding created dependency as so many in the student group had difficulty engaging in self-directed learning.

Students demonstrated a deeper awareness of assignment requirements in particular assignment structure. The implemented planned actions from loop one had positive results. Peer assessment was useful in enhancing and developing some individual learning. Tutor feedback required a little extra effort but was constructive when terms were explained. Tutor workload issue was emerging. Enhancing peer and self-assessment could address this. An underlying issue of spoon-feeding in previous years had emerged which I didn’t know how to deal with. I decided to discuss this with the college director when an opportunity arose.
Action Plan for Loop Three

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tutor Self Evaluation</th>
<th>Proposed Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continue to clarify feedback to individuals who require it.</td>
<td>Reiterate the benefits of self-assessment as a first check to improve work. Persist with peer assessment. Insist!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Implemented Actions in Loop Three

Insisting that the group self and peer assess had positive effects. I pointed out that as formative assessment was part of the assignment task and the benefits were reiterated. The students agreed to apply the procedures in assignment three. Individual students requiring clarification of tutor feedback were encouraged to discuss their understanding of the feedback in tutorials. All were encouraged to persist.

Loop Three

The Professional Development strand’s assignment required the student group to undertake a mini action research investigation during a six-week practicum. The assignment required the student to design and develop an investigation into an aspect of their teaching they wanted to improve. This was written up as a research report

Self-Assessment “Deeper Understandings As Learning Developed.”

“Deeper understandings as learning developed” discusses the effects of self-assessment on the student’s assignments.

The entire student group engaged with the procedure and it was encouraging to discover how the assignments had developed and improved.

This final loop revealed an in depth assessment of their assignments. Many became capable critics and made constructive comments. One student who had consistently achieved at lower
levels than her peers now demonstrated that she was recognising and thinking about her assignment and achieving higher levels. Others noted what they thought they had done well and wanted tutor feedback on areas they were unsure of.

*Peer assessment. “Peer Guidance and Suggestions.”*

“Peer guidance and suggestions,” describes the student group’s ongoing struggle with peer assessment.

Many still struggled with peer assessment with only a few giving constructive feedback. They wrote constructive feedback about each other’s work focusing on the work not the person. However some judgments were still made with one student writing on her peers work “you can do better than this.”

*Tutor Feedback. “Tutor Praise and Reminders.”*

“Tutor praise and reminders,” shows how tutor feedback reflected student’s individual learning requirements, offering positive comments and reminders.

Tutor feedback addressed student’s learning requirements. Feedback was constructive and further clarification was offered if required. For a struggling student some of my feedback was used to demonstrate how to improve e.g. the student wrote, “My musical resources that I used were” and I corrected alongside the sentence, “I used my musical resources etc.” Assignment improvement and development was further acknowledged with suggestions. Constructive qualified praise continued to be useful for lower achieving students while higher achievers received less feedback “tease this out, discuss the meaning first,” and they were asked to “think about this, describe carefully.” Although data was not kept on the summative assignment a check of the assessment book where assignment grades were written, revealed many students achieved higher grades and less substantial re-submits in the summative assignment.
Focus Group Discussion and Questionnaire. "Formative Assessment Procedures Are Mostly Beneficial."

The final focus group discussion was recorded during a very busy lunch break. The participating students were invited to join the group because of their diverse learning achievements. This included two students who had participated in the first focus group discussion.

"Formative assessment procedures are mostly beneficial," discusses the ways formative assessment procedures developed and improved student learning over the three assignments. Overall benefits to student and tutor are discussed with the perceived drawbacks highlighted.

At the beginning some were reluctant to self-assess, but as they gradually learned how to use the assessment criteria they found it useful "and we use it all the time." Higher achieving students found self-assessment was something they always did. Elizabeth didn’t hand in that she hadn’t checked thoroughly. However Grace recorded in her journal how the procedures had helped her to develop confidence in her work "I’m more confident that my assignments will be fine."

They had different experiences of peer assessment and although some found it to be of little value others found it beneficial. Elizabeth thought other students learned the process during the second and third loop and she remarked, "More people were prepared to actually critique it properly rather than just say um risk offending other people." There was still a feeling that relationships might be harmed. They suggested anonymous peer marking with the tutor choosing the peer to assess work for the next group.

They noticed tutor feedback had improved during the course, Mary recalled "I didn’t understand so much as what I do now." Mary now understood the feedback terms, which was evident in the improvement of her work as she applied tutor feedback to her summative assignments.

Synthesis of loop three.

In loop three the procedures had greater effect. Most of the student group, in particular lower achievers, self-assessed appropriately, recognising and thinking about what they had written while checking and improving their work. Self assessment although used reluctantly at first was
now applied regularly. Peer assessment highlighted that although there were drawbacks, some considered others’ perspectives. Tutor feedback was constructive with students’ learning needs acknowledged and addressed.

This final loop of the project indicated the action plan for the next student group.

As a result of the discovery that in 2005 students failed to absorb the formative assessment procedures at the beginning of the third year course, in 2006 this material is being introduced at the time the assignment is being worked rather than when it was issued. This is the point at which the student group need to refocus on assessment with the assignment topic and accompanying assessment criteria. They would be interested and ready to apply the formative assessment procedures.

The self and peer assessment procedures focusing on the assessing criteria will be carefully taught in class time through applying them to the first assignment. Allowing enough time for these procedures might establish a pattern, which the student group could apply to all assignments in 2006.

Peer assessment caused difficulty for the 2005 student group. In 2006 the detail will be discussed in class with groups of students drawing up examples of constructive feedback.

Tutor feedback is included as part of the procedure, which gives support for self and peer assessment. My aim is to enhance these through giving feed forward.

**Action Plan For 2006**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early Action</th>
<th>Ongoing Action</th>
<th>Tutor Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schedule a class with a specialised literacy tutor for the first week of the term.</td>
<td>Formative assessment offered on all assignments.</td>
<td>Double group size in 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue first assignment.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Spoon-feeding discuss in full staff meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formative assessment taught two weeks before first assignment due.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Time as an issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggest assessment criteria reformatted to allow more space for peer and self-assessment feedback.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Teach formative assessment well and feedback will take less time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student study groups to formulate constructive comments as feedback.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reducing tutor workload</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the analysis of the three formative assessment procedures in the action research cycles has lead to ongoing learning and development for the student group and the tutor.

The following chapter discusses the findings from this investigation.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter considers the themes arising in the last chapter for each aspect of triadic assessment. The three formal formative assessment procedures in relation to the research question are discussed and issues’ relating to tutor’s teaching practices are also raised and discussed in relation to the research question. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings on how formative assessment developed student learning and informed the tutor’s teaching.

How Formative Assessment Procedures Developed and Improved Student Learning.

Self Assessment

The formal self assessment procedure was effective in developing and improving learning for the most of the student group. The patterns that emerged were that lower achievers became higher achievers. This was seen in these student’s summative assignments as they began to recognise the assessment criteria in their work and engage with content, achieving consistent passes rather than resubmits.

During the first attempt most of the student group struggled to understand how to use the assessment criteria and attempted it by “testing the water.” It emerged that students had not understood the meanings of the assessment criteria terms. This concurs with (Brown & Knight;
1994; Tarras, 2001: 2003; and Black & Wiliam 1998b), who suggested that self assessment was only useful when the assessment criteria was explained and understood.

In the second loop by insisting that the student group kept trying, as consistent with Black & Wiliam (1998b) suggestions, the findings indicated “ways of understanding”, were emerging as most of the student group noticed and recognised areas in their assignments, requiring improvement. Students attempted to explain through their feedback how they had done this. In particular lower achievers work developed and improved as they began to take responsibility and develop autonomy in their learning, which Boud (1991) claimed could be expected.

It was in the final loop that most of the student group developed “deeper understandings” of the procedure when the content and structure of the targeted assignment, improved. Students became constructive critics of their work, which concurs with Fallows and Chandramohan (2001), who suggested that self-assessment helped students to be frank and objective about their work.

Initially the student group struggled with the self assessment procedure, which was consistent with Gale et al (2002), findings who reported that their study participants also had considerable difficulties. They suggested that this might be because a student focuses on weak areas in an assignment rather than on its strengths, which could be another explanation for the difficulties experienced especially for those students who put in so much effort. This was evident through Francesca’s story. Although Francesca read widely and spent a lot of time on her work she always acknowledged that she had made a huge effort. This was seen in her self assessment even though “effort” was not an assessment criterion. I pointed this out and by the third loop her work had really developed and improved to a level where she was passing summative work with higher grades.

Peer Assessment

The effective use of peer assessment to develop and improve student learning was limited to a few in the student group.

During the first loop “judged by ones peers,” emerged as an issue: it was difficult for many of the peer assessors to give and write constructive feedback when they still had to learn how to use the assessment criteria for their own work. The findings suggest that judging ones peers could cause difficulties in relationships with others. This was also the case in the Gale et al (2002) study who
writes that giving truthful feedback had to be weighed against friendships and relationships within the class. Perhaps if peer assessment had been taught and any perceived issues were discussed before the procedure was undertaken, then the reluctance may have been avoided.

Although in loop two some students managed to tentatively peer assess by offering "encouraging and useful advice" the feedback was at times still judgemental. Other students chose to ignore peer assessment and only committed to self-assessment. The targeted assignment, which was a literature review, was due shortly after the first term break and so finding a peer to assess during the break, was difficult which could explain why only some students peer assessed. Loop three "guidance and suggestions" revealed limited commitment to the procedure with a few undertaking it productively and reporting benefits. Some writers (Ballantyne, Hughes & Mylonas 2002) suggested awarding marks to students who participated in peer assessing which could encourage commitment. For this student group it seemed that there was an issue of time especially as many assignments were completed the night before the formative assessment due date leaving little time for peer assessment. Although this could be addressed by allocating time in class to complete it perhaps it is more spoon feeding which would discourage self-directed learning.

Some of the student group had perceptions of others having higher achievements in the group and assumed that they were unable to give constructive comments. As one student said "it was really hard as everyone was at a different writing level." The differences in achievements emerged as a barrier in giving constructive feedback and might explain the reluctance in full participation of peer assessment. Although Fallows & Chandramohan (2001) said that a group member with advanced knowledge of a subject could not be assumed, for this group the achievement status was established.

Although peer assessing was useful to some group members in this project, the findings suggested that this formative assessment procedure developed and improved learning for a few.

Tutor Feedback

Although I believed my feedback was constructive and useful in the first loop it emerged as "technical and not constructive," which was a negative experience for many students and an insight for me. The feedback was not understood and therefore many students could only guess at
the intent. They tried to understand what I meant and attempted to interpret the comments develop and improve the assignment. Weedon (2000) reported similar findings describing a mismatch between what tutors wrote and what students believed the message meant. Boud (1995) said the key to effective feedback was carefully chosen words.

The findings in the first loop informed teaching practice and so the feedback terms were explained in class discussions and informal oral feedback. In the second loop by attending to writing the feedback in terms which were further qualified with a brief explanation, the findings revealed "constructive comments." These comments were written with care but took time, which was emerging as an issue I needed to address.

Students were encouraged to ask for further oral clarification if required which was a useful option for students who had difficulty in understanding how to effectively apply the comments. Several students took this opportunity and discussed the feedback meaning with other students and myself, which resulted in improved work. The writers (Brown & Knight, 1994; Orsmond et al., 1997) had similar findings and suggested it was useful to include an offer of verbal clarification.

During loop three the feedback reflected on individual student’s learning requirements with “praise and reminders,” as constructive feedback. I learned from student work and individual oral clarification about specific student’s learning requirements and tried to address these through the feedback. However this drew my attention to another critical issue, student support which is discussed later in this chapter.

How Formative Assessment Procedures Informed Tutor Teaching.

Critical Issues.

Critical educational research is concerned with change and provides a problem solving “approach for teachers who are committed to investigate through action research the taken-for-granted relationships and practices in their professional lives” (Mills, 2003 p. 7). This section addresses and explains the findings in relation to my teaching practices.

In the first loop I confidently assumed that the entire student group would learn from the formative assessment procedures and be prepared to accept changes to assessment practices. Although I was aware of lower achievers past experiences I failed to acknowledge students who
had consistently experienced high achievements in previous year’s work. This was drawn to my attention after the summative marking of the first assignment in loop one when two students challenged formative assessment procedures usefulness if they still had a resubmit. Although we discussed this there was an underlying tension, which was difficult to resolve. I tried to acknowledge it through feedback on further work and resolved to address this with new student groups. Perhaps the reluctance of one of these students to fully participate in the procedures was due to this initial experience.

Feedback messages also needed to be addressed. The pedantic and authoritarian style I had adopted did little to enhance learning. Deeper thinking about this issue highlighted the need for change to how my feedback was written. Black & Wiliam (1998a) and Crooks (2001) said good feedback would enhance and facilitate learning therefore the feedback message should aim to be clear and in descriptive terms that encourage the receiver to think and engage with content.

Writing carefully considered constructive feedback took time and this highlighted for me the importance of teaching future student groups how to formatively assess. In doing this I hope to eliminate this issue of time.

During the transcription of the first focus group discussion I suddenly heard my voice offering my opinion and talking over a student who I had not really listened to. This was a critical and humbling revelation I saw myself through the students’ eyes Brookfield (1995) and was reminded of his suggestion that a “critically reflective teacher would know the power—both positive and negative—of his withholding speech” (Brookfield, 1995 p.14). This is an ongoing issue, which I am endeavouring to notice and change by standing back and allowing time to listen and hear the student voice.

Through trying to promote the best interests of all learners in the student group another issue emerged. Feedback as support to facilitate lower achieving students learning became a concern. I wanted these students to succeed and believed that carefully written feedback with some detailed explanation could encourage this. I wondered if I was spoon-feeding and how others in the student group saw the extra support. Discussing this with the college director I asked her to read the feedback to establish its appropriateness. It was established that the feedback was in the best interests of the students and if other students voiced concerns to discuss it openly.
The action research approach has helped me to confront my own teaching practice and learn from it. Collegial support alerted me to issues. I developed greater self-knowledge and a deeper understanding of my teaching practices, in particular the action research approach research has empowered me to closely examine my “taken-for-granted relationships and practices” (Mills, 2003 p. 7), and begin to effect teaching and assessment changes.

**Implications for Teaching and Learning.**

When a tutor is also a researcher it is possible to work with ones students to investigate and improve learning and later to report on that process.

This action research project demonstrates how participants within this group developed fresh understandings as they worked together to learn how to improve learning. The investigation highlighted some insights into formative assessment procedures in improving and developing the students’ learning while informing the tutor’s teaching.

Self-assessment develops and improves learning especially for lower achievers: as they learn about assessment criteria and become higher achievers. I saw that lower achievers in this student group also became self-directed and autonomous learners as they developed confidence in their abilities. This was evident by the reduction in the number of times they arrived in my office with parts of assignments for me to check. However most of the student group reported that they benefited from learning about the assessment criteria and applied this new learning to other assignments.

Peer assessment was difficult for most of the group, which is attributed to the diverse range of achievements. Many students believed they could not give constructive feedback because of their limited experience. This raised two questions, which related to how teaching practices could help learners within a group.

1. There is a need to acknowledge all learners strengths throughout a course of study and be careful of attributing status to higher achievers.

2. Formative assessment procedures are beneficial when everyone knows what constructive feedback looks like, which could be achieved through providing good
examples. It might be useful if the concerns expressed by students are discussed in class and for tutors and students to work together to find a way to peer assess.

This research has pointed to the value of fleeting comments for a teacher who has ongoing investigation in mind. Within a casual conversation students mentioned that peer assessment was not very important, as it was not allocated class time. Consideration to allocating class time to peer assessment might give it more value. However this is something to discuss with future groups of students, especially in relation to spoon feeding and self directed learning.

The investigation alerted me to critical teaching issues. Two of these, (listening and hearing students before offering my opinion, and writing constructive feedback which enhances learning,) are informing my current teaching and learning. Implications in doing this research project have illustrated that implementing an action research approach can change teaching and learning by unravelling teaching practices. Although this means confronting accepted practices and making changes it is worth it as both student and teacher benefit. Even though this project is finished I regard this year as another further loop of the spiral.

**Conclusion**

This investigation has taught me what can be learnt about formative assessment and this has led to substantiative insights into students’ learning from my perspective and the need for the teaching programme to be modified in various ways. It has provided opportunities for me to address assumptions about my teaching and led to an ongoing interest in finding ways to listen to my students as they explored their own learning. The next chapter suggests some limitations and fresh questions.

**Chapter 6 Limitations**

**Research Process**

There are some limitations identified in this project.
The focus group discussions were valuable for obtaining information but it was difficult to ensure students stayed on the topic when they wanted to discuss other issues. As the facilitator I could have steered the speakers back to the topic but didn’t, as the issues seemed more important at the time. Focus group discussions are a valuable data source and I realise now as I reflect on the project that by attending to advice in the literature on this (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000) I could have improved these e.g. “chairing the meeting so that a balance is struck” (p. 288).

Perhaps focus group discussions could be part of a wider approach to improving my learning and that of my students by using principles of critical reflection to enhance our discussions. Brookfield’s (1995) model of viewing teaching through four critical lenses comes to mind: research and theory on tertiary teaching, autobiographies (my history as a teacher and student) the views of my colleagues and the students’ ideas and experiences. Consideration given to this model in discussion groups could enhance learning.

The focus group discussions would, under this model, continue beyond this project, as part of ongoing discussions about improving teaching for both my students and myself.

My dual role as tutor and student highlighted the difficulty a student has when feedback is written in terms, which are hard to interpret. This can be a barrier to learning especially after a student has worked very hard on an assignment and the feedback fails to recognise this.

I struggled with the ethics of inviting the students to participate in the project, as they were such a small group. I therefore carefully pointed out the concept underpinning ethics that of maximising good and minimising harm. I wanted to reassure them that they were not expected to be participants if they had any concerns. The entire group signed the consent from which perhaps raises a question for the influence of a tutor teaching a small student group.

The delay in receiving ethical approval highlighted that an action research approach works for teachers, as action research models can be adapted to suit teaching time frames. Although normal teaching duties commenced without the ethical approval it concerned this novice researcher who was keen to start the project at the beginning of the college year.
Ongoing value

This project highlights the effects of the formal formative assessment procedures on developing and improving student learning particularly for lower achievers, whose self-esteem developed in relation to other students.

The key to formative assessment’s success is through the teacher understanding that it is assessment for learning where as summative assessment is of learning.

I finish with a quotation from Paige who struggled with literacy achievement and worked very hard. It encapsulates a key finding of this study that formative assessment provides lower achieving students access to strategies that higher achieving students already use. Paige wrote with pride in her final questionnaire:

"With your help from the formative assessment I’m now a teacher."
References


Appendices
Appendix A: Venn Diagram

Venn Diagram

Loop One
- Strand delivery
  - Jan, Feb, March

Loop Two
- Delivery
  - May, June, July

Loop Three
- Revision
  - Aug 1st

Loop Four
- A&K Report

Feedback
- Data sources
  - Feedback x 3
  - Questionnaire x 1
  - Focus groups x 1
  - Reflective journals (min)

Action Plan
- From data

Observe and Analyze
- Data sources
  - Feedback x 3
  - Data analysis

Reflective journals
- Generated knowledge about my practice

Model B

Diagnostic action
Appendix B: Assessment Criteria

Assignment Title: Literature review of a researched topic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name: ____________________________</th>
<th>Marker: ____________________________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Review</th>
<th>Resubmit</th>
<th>Pass</th>
<th>Pass +</th>
<th>Commendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Topic is relevant to practice.</td>
<td>Some views expressed, but limited/no analysis of material.</td>
<td>Demonstrates understanding of the topic and satisfactory presentation of content</td>
<td>All sections of assignment presented soundly, showing understanding of each stated area.</td>
<td>Comprehensive coverage of content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Discussion addresses comparison &amp; evaluation of literature.</td>
<td>Links not evident or limited.</td>
<td>Any section of assignment incomplete.</td>
<td>Evidence of insight and depth of knowledge and understanding of topic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Inclusion of 5-10 published materials.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Relevance of material to early childhood.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Evidence of links between knowledge of literature and discussion in relation to use for a child's profile.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>References and evidence not relevant or used appropriately, References are not integrated or explained</td>
<td>References mostly relevant, used appropriately and explained, Evidence supports discussion in some areas.</td>
<td>Relevant references presented, integrated &amp; explained appropriately. Meet a satisfactory standard in each stated area.</td>
<td>Relevant references presented, integrated &amp; explained appropriately to a highly satisfactory standard in each stated area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References and evidence supports discussion and are understood.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Does not present assignment in appropriate essay format. -Referencing conventions not met -Stated word count not met</td>
<td>Presentation of assignment is mostly accurate in essay format.</td>
<td>Presentation of assignment is of a satisfactory standard</td>
<td>Presentation of assignment is fully accurate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Style</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- APA conventions (including spelling and grammar).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Word requirement.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments:

Final grade:
Appendix C: Loop One Focus Questionnaire

Focus Questions.

Part of the process of gathering information on the effects that formative assessment has on your learning is through your informal and formal feedback. I want to understand what some of those effects were from the formative assessment processes (i.e. self and peer assessment and tutor feedback), which you undertook during the literature review assignment in the Human Development and Learning module. Please answer the following questions:

- What were the benefits to your learning from the formative assessment of the assignment?

- What drawbacks (if any) did you encounter?

- In what ways did you use any of the procedures to develop your summative assignment?

- What suggestions would you make to any of the formative assessment procedures?
Appendix D: Retrospective Focus Questionnaire

Focus Questions

At the end of the project I want to understand how useful using formative assessment within the three-targeted assignments was to developing your learning. Please focus on your overall view in retrospect.

Please think back to some of the ways you used formative assessment to develop your learning? E.g. self/peer assessment? Tutor written/verbal feedback?

- In what ways did any/all/some of these procedures support your learning? Please describe?

- In what ways did any/all/some of these methods hinder your learning?

- In what ways were any of the formative assessment procedures useful in developing your summative assignment?

- If I was to repeat some of the formative assessment procedures for other groups of students in what ways and when would you suggest I did this?
Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet.

Dear,

You will be aware that I am to undertake a research project as part of the requirements for the Master of Teaching and Learning at the Christchurch College of Education. The aim of the research project is to explore in which ways formative assessment develops student learning and informs tutor teaching. I am interested in finding out if formative assessment procedures develop your learning. I plan to use formative assessment, which involves your participation in peer, and self-assessment procedures, as part of the following assignments this year.

Educational Studies in Human Learning and Development: Assignment, literature review.

Diversity Studies: Assignment, literature review

Professional Development: Assignment, action research project.

The following are ways in which I will ask you for your interpretations of the formative assessment procedures, which I would use as data and analysis for the project

- Discussions from shared group reflective discussions, which may be recorded and transcribed.
- Relevant episodes from your reflective journal.
- Answers from specific evaluative focus questions.

Confidentiality of the data will be maintained at all times. No student name will be used in the study. Pseudonyms will be used. All tapes, transcriptions, and other data will be kept in a secure location for a period of five years.

I will provide you with a copy of the summary of my findings at the completion of the project. All participants' names in the project will be anonymous and you are able to withdraw from the project at any time and request that your focused question answer, photocopied, journal writings, transcribed words, and words identified in discussion are destroyed and not used in the project. You would be provided with a copy of the report.

I can assure you that if you would like to withdraw from the project then none of the personal writing or your recorded statements will be used in my report. Any shared resources or documents that have been put together by you and other students would still be available to me as data. Should you choose to withdraw from the project then you will continue in the course and complete your studies without your withdrawal jeopardising your results in any way.

The Christchurch College of Education Ethic's Committee has reviewed and approved this study.

Complaints.

If you have any complaint concerning the manner in which this research project is conducted you should make that complaint to myself as the researcher, or should you prefer an independent person you should contact,

The Chair,
Ethical Clearance Committee Christchurch College of Education,
PO Box 31-065

Christchurch. Phone (03) 348 2059.

Rosie Macalister. RangiRuru Early Childhood College. Phone 9833759.

Supervisor: Elaine Mayo elaine.mayo@ccc.ac.nz Contact Number. 345 8447.
Appendix F: Self Feedback

Cycle One
Self Feedback

Graded the aspects rather than which feedback:
My past - I feel trick where I'm at
I have done it well.

Technical - referenced correctly
Quotes - write about 200

Student feedback covered main points in depth.
After feedback went to find what I needed to do.

I liked the feedback.
Can see what I need to do and where
have completed to test my understanding.
Belief about why.

I've done it well.
I've done it well.

Write why.


can identify
areas nar into.

Uncertainty of expectations.
Constraints, heighten an end goal.

I think I met the criteria.
I feel I have spent a lot of
Thought.

I feel I have a great knowledge
Of my topic.

To best of my knowledge, may
have caused a clear flow.

I have
## Appendix G: Peer Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer Assessment</th>
<th>Technical Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cycle One</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback -</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What peers said</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Assessment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Feed-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>back</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graded - peer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **You have done a fantastic job.**
- Related topic introduction -
- A good structure - easy to read.

- **I think you have written a good argument.**
- I don’t think this is not a bad thing -
- More information.

- May benefit from support.
- Examples need to help make the point.

- Interesting & read.
- Lots of valuable info.
- Well done -
- Some very relevant.

- Cycle one peer
- Friendly words -
- But is it feedback?
Appendix I: Data Analysis Sorting Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Explanations</th>
<th>What did I learn?</th>
<th>Action plan for Next Loop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Getting to know you</td>
<td>‘D so much development in your learning. There are hardly any spelling mistakes. My crossings out are all about sentence structure. Try instead of ‘as well as’ contrasts’ ‘your ideas and readings are great. You understand your topic and now you should carefully notice how a paragraph is crafted, discuss with me. ‘P you have developed---some linking required. Try to evaluate and compare with a bit more focus.’ I agree with your self-assessment that you have some bits to fix and develop. Make more of a point about----‘M you have understood the requirements and presented--.’ ‘C delete these magazine style phrases and rewrite. This sentence is too long you can cut it back and still get your message across.’</td>
<td>I could ‘see’ the students as I wrote the formative feedback. I had individual meetings with them and ‘knew’ them better than in the first loop. I also wrote more in depth neatly and in pencil. I addressed them by name in the feedback. It certainly made for easier reading for all of us. The results were worth the extra effort.</td>
<td>Making an extra effort to write to each student by including their name and remembering something about their learning made a difference.</td>
<td>I resolved to continue to pay attention to this detail with more of the same.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>