

Embedding Formative Assessment at Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School

A Case Study into the introduction and implementation of Embedding Formative Assessment

Embedding Formative Assessment (EFA) is a two-year supported programme of monthly Teacher Learning Community meetings (TLCs) focusing on embedding key strategies of formative assessment. This is a whole school programme where teachers meet in groups of 10 – 14 with TLC meetings calendared every 4 weeks for 75 minutes. These groups are facilitated by a TLC leader who is a member of school staff, however, they are not expected to be a formative assessment expert.

Why Embed Formative Assessment?

“There is no other way of raising standards for which such a strong prima facie case can be made.” (Black & Wiliam, Inside the Black Box)

The rationale for starting the Embedding Formative Assessment programme by SSAT at Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School was the careful consideration of the best available evidence and collective wisdom of the teaching profession for what improves student outcomes. What we found comes out on top in countless studies, and from our own personal experiences, is that if as a teacher you know what the student already knows then you can teach accordingly. This premise has stood the test of time and as educational fads come and go, Formative Assessment has remained.

“If I had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, I would say this: The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him [or her] accordingly.” (Ausubel, 1968)

We were confident through our quality assurance processes that this was not an area of weakness but that we felt we could all improve in our effectiveness in checking for understanding and developing habits in the classroom that support this. We felt this was an appropriate and impactful area to focus on.

One of the challenges for an experienced body of staff has been clarifying a shared understanding of the term formative assessment. It is surprisingly difficult to have this shared understanding since it has been associated and wedded to many teaching and learning phrases over the past few decades: assessment for learning, adaptive teaching, responsive teaching, mastery teaching and others.

All these highlight merits and aspects of the broader definition of formative assessment, and they are often used interchangeably. One strength of the programme has been in helping us to

build knowledge on clarifying this shared, broad, understanding of formative assessment and what this looks like in the classroom.

As a school we felt it was important to distinguish the differing levels of assessment that occur within the schools into long cycle (across terms and units of work), medium cycle (within and between units of work) and short cycle (within and between lessons - minute by minute). All of which can be argued to be formative at differing levels and purposes.

Having then considered the research on formative assessment, and the weight behind it of more than 40 years of evidence, conclude that enhancing formative assessment within the short cycles shows consistent substantial affects. Below were just 5 of the studies that synthesize about 4000 research reports demonstrating these **substantial affects**:

- Natriello (1987)
- Crooks (1988)
- Kluger & DeNisi (1996)
- Black & Wiliam (1998)
- Nyquist (2003)

In our most recent TLC session we spent time reviewing the influential paper 'Inside the Black Box' by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998) which helped define this for us.

"We use the general term assessment to refer to all those activities undertaken by teachers—and by their students in assessing themselves—that provide information to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities. Such assessment becomes formative assessment when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching to meet student needs."
(Black & Wiliam, 1998 p.140)

Formative assessment is often cited as 'responsive teaching'. This does still fall short of the definition by Black and Wiliam since it omits the learners role too. This was really important to us as a school. We wanted to focus on the role of the learner within their education and how we as practitioners can support our *learners to become owners of their own learning*. This has been an area that we felt we could develop students habits that are effective for them to act as owners of their learning. That is why we wanted to join the programme to help structure our staff development to meet these aims.

The Training and Support

An in-school EFA Lead was identified who was then supported by an EFA Mentor by SSAT for the two years of the programme. The EFA Mentor provides support, training and coaching around the effective implementation to ensure the school strategically maximizes the impact of the programme and it becomes a sustainable feature of the school. The support provided by an EFA Mentor includes:

- An initial day's training for school leaders and teachers leading the TLC meetings, this is delivered in-school or virtually.



- Emails/telephone calls with the EFA Mentor with key reflection and planning points.
- Two face-to-face visits at the end of year one and two to review the programme and plan the next steps in implementation.
- A wide breadth of supporting resources, exemplars and case studies.

When the school started the programme lock down still presented many challenges for staff. Delivering online lessons and checking for understanding became even more difficult. As a school we had to adapt to this like all schools but since we had also just began the programme we were also mindful of just how important checking for understanding was and how, now reflecting back in the classroom, the strategies that we deploy to improve the teaching and learning.

Teacher Learner Communities (TLC) Workshops

Teachers attended roughly monthly TLC workshops. These sessions have a fairly ridged framework with material for each session to cover. However, there is plenty of time within the sessions for colleagues to share current practices and things they are working on. For the second year we have divided the TLC workshop into two halves. The first half is facilitated by TLC leaders around the programme content and then the second half is within faculties to plan what this might look like for each faculty and to agree upon areas most relevant to their subject and set achievable targets to be completed between sessions. Peer observations were planned during these sessions to share best practices and reflect on successes and areas for improvement.

The course content is broken down into evidence-informed strategies that can be used to support learning. These strategies devised by Wiliam and Leahy (2015) cover a range of intricacies of teaching and gets to the crux of the role of the teacher, but additionally the role of the learners too. These strategies attempt to go beyond the simple perception that formative assessment is a gimmick or technique to demonstrate performance. The five strategies are shown below:

- Clarifying, understanding, and sharing learning intentions.
- Engineering effective classroom discussions, tasks and activities that elicit evidence of learning.
- Providing feedback that moves learners forward.
- Activating students as learning resources for one another.
- Activating students as owners of their own learning.

In addition to the workshops the success of the programme is in the mechanisms for effective professional development. Much of the components support making a difference to classroom practice. For example, the paired lesson drop ins, actioning planning and teaching techniques are all endorsed by the EEF's professional development review into effective professional development.

Outcomes and Impact

Like most schools the disruption of COVID, and a change in school lead, the programme has had challenges in maintaining the momentum amongst the many demands of school life. However, during TLC workshops staff discuss openly the strategies they are attempting within their classrooms. They have welcomed the opportunity to share good practice across faculties and the supportive nature of the workshops has ensured content is not overwhelming and time commitments to the programme are realistic.

Following the COVID disruption, the programme itself has acted as a catalyst to encourage peer observations across the school. Notably, we are seeing changes in practice for individuals, who have a greater appreciation and knowledge of a range of approaches to effective formative assessment. But we are also observing more significant changes within faculties, where new formative assessment opportunities have become routine, impacting positively on students' behaviour towards feedback and their desire to take control of improving their outcomes.

The impact of the programme has been evident during our faculty reviews as part of our quality assurance process. Here, we have seen evidence of improved student engagement during assessment activities in class, and students becoming more purposeful in working with teachers to act on feedback. Where formative assessment approaches have become more routine, students have reflected positively during student voice sessions, citing a more secure understanding of where they need to improve and a confidence to know how to do so.

Further Information about Embedding Formative Assessment

Further information is available on [SSAT's website](#). Embedding Formative Assessment is one of the is [Education Endowment Foundation's \(EEF\) Promising Projects](#). The EEF ran an effectiveness trial in 2018 which found that students in Embedding Formative Assessment schools made the equivalent of two months additional progress, further information about this trial is available [here](#).

We received 50% match-funding towards the training for Embedding Formative Assessment from the [EEFective Kent Project](#). This project is a partnership between [Kent County Council](#) and the [Education Endowment Foundation](#).

For more information about current and future funding opportunities for Kent schools and academies from the [EEFective Kent Project visit the project's webpage](#) or contact the project team directly (EEFectiveKentProject@kent.gov.uk).