

What Does the Classroom Assessment Research Say?

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As part of a recent review of the research literature in the area of classroom assessment I have found several studies of interest. This article is a summary of seven research studies.

1. Research Summary: Does Classroom Assessment Make a Difference?

Black and Wiliam (1998) studied over 500 classroom assessment research studies that were conducted around the world between 1987 and 1997. They asked three research questions:
Does classroom assessment make a difference?
How much difference does it make?
What kinds of things make that difference?

In answer to the first question, does classroom assessment make a difference; the answer was a resounding yes. In response to the second question, how much difference does it make, they explained that if Britain had been doing the kinds of things that make a difference rather than being middle of the pack in the International math assessment (TIMMS), they would have been in the top five. When you think about students in your classroom you can expect to see a 2-3 year grade equivalent increase or more. All students benefit, however the students showing the largest gains are those who struggle the most. The third question, what kinds of things make a difference, resulted in Black and Wiliam highlighting three key assessment actions:

1. Involve students in the classroom assessment process
2. Increase descriptive, specific feedback, and
3. Decrease evaluation feedback.

2. Research Summary: Testing, Motivation and Learning

In *Testing, Motivation, and Learning* (2002), The Assessment Reform Group of Britain reports the results of a research study into the relationship between testing (summative evaluation) and motivation to learn. Based on the research findings they identify key classroom assessment actions teachers can take to enhance motivation for learning including:

DO MORE....

- Explaining and discussing the purpose and relevance of learning,
- Providing choice and scaffolding students towards responsibility,
- Providing opportunities for students to learn with others,
- Providing specific, descriptive feedback and involving students in assessment, setting criteria, and setting goals,
- Involving students in on-going self-assessment, especially helping students give themselves feedback in relation to clear, easily understood criteria for success, and
- Encouraging students to value effort and helping students understand that success has many different looks.

DO LESS....

- Testing,
- Drill and practice for test taking,
- Self-evaluation (asking students to judge their work in terms of scores or grades),
- Comparison of students in terms of test results and evaluations, and
- Encouraging of competition for marks or grades amongst students.

3. Research Summary: Classroom Assessment

Brookhart & Bronowicz (2003) conducted a research project which was a multiple case study. They interviewed 161 students in seven teachers' classrooms in four different schools looking at thirty-six classroom assessments. They looked at student perceptions of classroom assessments which counted for final grades, the assignments interests and importance, students' self-efficacy for accomplishing the tasks and their goal orientation, and the classroom assessment environment. One theme that emerged was that "no matter what the assessment, students' comments were referenced to their own needs and interests." (p. 239) There were developmental differences with grades three and five students talking about the quality of their performance and high school students referring to expectations for process (to study on own time, to come in after class). They refer to a shift from a focus on learning to a focus on grading. They say, "Changes in American grading practices and uses would be required to maintain this student focus on learning." (p. 240)

4. Research Summary: Self-Assessment

McDonald & Boud's (2003) research investigates the impact of training high school students to self-assess on their performance in external examinations. 256 teachers were selected from a sample of ten high schools (top, middle and bottom levels of achievement) and trained to teach students to use self-assessment. A control group was selected from matched classes not receiving training. "A significant difference favoring those trained in self-assessment was found overall and in each curriculum area." (p. 209)

Quotes:

"A common theme shared by many of the key writers about formative assessment is that it is not sufficient for feedback on learning to be solely the province of teachers. Students themselves, it is argued, have a necessary role in taking responsibility for assessing their own work." (McDonald & Boud, 2003, p. 210)

“This study supports the assertions of the non-empirical literature of self-assessment that training students in self-assessment can contribute to their learning outcomes as formally assessed by conventional tests. It also demonstrates that self-assessment training can be introduced into high schools in such a way that students can benefit directly from the development of teachers in this area.” (McDonald & Boud, 2003, p. 219)

5. Research Summary: Using Assessment for Learning

Brookhart’s (2001) study explores student perceptions about classroom assessment looking at both formative and summative aspects. Students selected were successful students in grades 11 and 12 English and Anatomy. Successful students were self-monitoring, they were attending to the assessment information in terms of what it told them about themselves as learners - this included helping them understand what they needed to get better at being more successful (e.g. writing a certain kind of report). “The contribution of this study has been to document and illustrate the way good students use assessment information. They engage in self-assessment as a regular, ongoing process and actively try to fit new information about their learning into their careers as students.” (p. 169)

6. Research Summary: Feedback

The Higgins et al (2002) research study focused on students’ understandings of feedback. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews and administered a questionnaire with students in business and humanities courses. Their findings indicate that although the grade is of paramount importance, students are interested in the feedback comments. Students indicated that they deserve the feedback. The researchers write, “The argument that feedback [comments] will be ignored or only used if it provides ‘correct answers’ cannot be sustained.” (p. 61)

7. Research Summary: Setting and Using Criteria

The Osmond et al (2002) study focused on first year Environmental Sciences and Applied Biology undergraduates. They were required to construct scientific posters. There were 22 students who worked in groups of three or four to develop and then employ marking criteria, although each student constructed an individual poster and was marked individually. There are four main conclusions reported by the authors:

- “1. The use of exemplars can help students demonstrate greater understanding of both marking criteria and subject standards.
2. The use of exemplars can help student learning so that higher quality outcomes are produced, but may not necessarily help students in the process of poster construction.
3. The use of exemplars forms a focus for meaningful feedback.
4. When students are asked to assess a product the peer assessor is able to make a more objective assessment of the product than the self-assessor. This may be because the peer assessor objectively looks at the product in isolation of the process.” (p. 321)