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Question: When is a COMMENT not worth the paper it's written on?

Answer: When it's accompanied by a level, grade or mark!

In this article, Simon Butler advances a strong case for 'comments only' marking. Good assessment, he argues, is about encouraging students to reflect on their current performance and take responsibility for their own progress. Assigning levels to pupils' work is often justified in terms of the generation of targets which help to 'raise standards'. In fact, Butler and others argue that regularly awarding levels may actually *hinder* student progress. Those who argue that it is the government, ultimately, who sets the 'levelling' agenda will notice that Butler draws heavily from the Key Stage 3 Strategy and from the research which inspired much of its assessment materials. In his view, the official line is now moving towards a more sophisticated and developmental approach to assessment which is more likely to create a climate for lifelong learning. Here, he shares the findings of a 'comments only' assessment project in local schools and offers a useful strategy that departments can adapt.

Since what appears to be the year zero (1991) and the birth of the English National Curriculum, many, if not all, of our schools have become obsessed with the writing of a National Curriculum level on students' work. Furthermore, there has been a growing expectation that this should be regularly recorded and reported to an appropriate member of the Senior Management Team sometimes as frequently as every six weeks. Many history teachers have been compelled by school policy to award effort grades and merit marks for Year 7 students early in the autumn term after perhaps only five or six hours in their lessons. This has been justified by the school's official number cruncher (the person responsible for data collection and assessment) as a DfES directive from on high or else a necessary pre-requisite to meet the targets set by the LEA and to 'raise standards'.

However, whilst effective and selective use of data can clearly play a part in setting long-term targets for cohorts of students, it can only raise attainment and even more importantly create lifelong learners if it is used formatively and VERY sparingly with the students themselves. The work carried out by the King's College team, led by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, has been very influential in this area.¹ In their second publication, *Working inside the Black Box*, they point to the work of R. Butler (no relation!) whose research concluded that 'whilst pupils' learning can be advanced by feedback through comments, the giving of marks has a negative effect in that pupils ignore comments when marks are also given.'² Similarly, Shirley Clarke argues that: 'Grades freeze children into "ego-related" mode rather than "task-related" mode'. Anyone who gets a B or above is likely to feel complacent and anyone with a B- or below tends to feel demoralised.'³ This same comment could, of course, be said about National Curriculum levels or effort grades. In Key Stage 3, perhaps the B might equate to a Level 5+.

A window into the students' minds?

It was therefore with considerable enthusiasm that, as a new Key Stage 3 Foundation Subjects Consultant in September 2002, I sensed the first inklings of a counter number crunching revolution. By this stage, the King's College assessment team's pilot schools were reporting considerable success in comments only marking strategies, supported by peer and self-assessment activities. Perhaps there was an opportunity to escape from Room 101 after all! I had a Winston Smith style flashback to a time before Big Brother. It was not oranges and lemons I heard, but rather a phrase used by a Deputy Headteacher in Oxfordshire. When introducing a new whole-school reporting system to the staff, he memorably suggested that the students' own self-assessment section was 'a window into the students' minds'. Maybe the findings of the Black Box team is a route out of a black hole of constant levelling and grading, providing an opportunity to get inside the mind of the learner.

This initial enthusiasm turned to excitement as the Key Stage 3 National Strategy team started to plan and prepare training materials for a whole-school approach to assessment for learning, including a unit which focuses on oral and written formative feedback.⁴ Some of the key messages clearly indicate that the days of number crunching alone are indeed numbered. Take, for example, the following sentence: 'Written feedback [should] focus on providing high quality, detailed and informative marking on a selective basis rather than the cursory surface marking for all pupils on every piece of work'. Or this: 'written feedback cannot work unless oral feedback is detailed, personalised and routinely provides the information pupils need to make progress.'⁵ Here is a new vision of individualised learning based on formative assessment

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which appears to offer a new alternative to the ‘data rich, information poor’ culture of recent years.

Comments only marking strategies in Key Stage 3 history

Here in Devon, a number of history colleagues have been trialling a comments only approach to written feedback as part of their Key Stage 3 Strategy assessment for learning work. In particular, the ideas of Shirley Clarke have influenced the project. Her work on a ‘Three and One’ feedback method at Key Stage 2 has been adapted to address the requirements of Key Stage 3 history (see Figure 1). The Strategy materials talk about assessing work that represents ‘significant milestones’. Most of the colleagues involved in the trialling project initially selected a Year 7 class and chose a significant milestone to assess in detail. Typically, this was ‘Why did the Normans (or William or Guillaume) win the Battle of Hastings?’ (quelle surprise!). In some cases, this has stimulated considerable debate around the issue of progression: how can we develop students’ understanding of, in this example, causal reasoning as they move into Years 8 and 9?

Clarke strongly advocates the importance of having a limited number of success criteria directly related to the primary learning objectives of the task. In the particular enquiry on the Battle of Hastings, these are most likely to focus, first, on explaining why William won (i.e. causal reasoning) and second, on developing students’ ability to write structured pieces of discursive writing. Therefore on this occasion, feedback on spelling, presentation, grammar and perceived effort should be avoided at all costs: ‘Expecting children to apply all the criteria they have ever been taught for every piece of writing means we are treating every piece of writing as a test.’⁶

Closing the gap

In order to illustrate this ‘Three and One’ strategy in practice, Figures 2 and 3 contain a sample of students’ work. In each case, the feedback has identified three aspects of the work which met some of the success criteria for the assignment (highlighted in red/pink) and one aspect in which the work could be improved (marked in bold) to ‘close the gap’ between current and future learning. Many teachers confine their ‘closing the gap’ comments to the reminder style prompt (See Figure 1, phase 3). Whilst this can often be grasped by the higher attaining (or do we mean more literate) student, it does not necessarily provide sufficient support for others. Clarke therefore suggests adopting either ‘scaffolding prompt’ comments (see Figure 2) or ‘example prompt’ comments (see Figure 3) which provide more concrete illustrations of how to improve.

Finally, Clarke argues that the students must be given time in a lesson to respond to the feedback: ‘without

the feedback information being used by the child, the improvement suggestion is unlikely to be carried over to future work in different contexts.’⁷ Teachers must consequently plan opportunities for Phase 4 (see Figure 1) to take place. It could be a structured starter activity or an easy-to-set homework, followed up with a ‘pair and share’ peer assessment task. I would also suggest, when tackling the same or similar types of assignment at a future date, that it is important to ensure that the students revisit their previous work to remind them of past achievements and ways to improve. This can be done simply enough by ensuring that students keep a portfolio of their major assignments, annual reports, self-reviews and any examination papers. This portfolio can also be a very useful tool at parent/guardian evenings and can be passed from one teacher to another throughout Key Stage 3 and beyond.

What is a milestone?

The notion of assessing work which ‘represents milestones in the pupils’ learning’ raises fundamental questions about what these ‘milestones’ might be in Key Stage 3 history. If milestones break up a journey, then where is the journey heading? In other words, what might be the relationship between the milestones we identify and the notions of progression that underpin them?

Whilst this article does not seek to address this issue in detail, history departments need to give some careful thought to the selection of their milestones. This will, in part, be influenced by the time allocated to the history curriculum in Key Stage 3, their own opinion of the relative importance of the five ‘Key Elements’ within it,⁸ the GCSE assessment rubric of their chosen course (what do the students need to get better at doing to help them succeed in Key Stage 4 and beyond) and perhaps most fundamental of all, their own perception of what progression at Key Stage 3 might look like. If the milestone identified by the teachers in our project centres on causal reasoning and discursive writing, should subsequent milestones also centre on these in order to secure progress (and what might that progress look like?)? Or should milestones on the journey through Key Stage 3 centre on different second-order concepts and skills? The answer probably lies in a combination of the two, but every history department must decide this for itself.

Assessing our assessing

So how successful was our trial? Whenever a teacher tries a new strategy to enhance teaching and learning, careful planning is required if the activities are to involve students publicly sharing their learning with others. Therefore we found that it was important for the teacher to create a safe and secure environment and to manage the peer assessment activities sensitively. It was also essential to explain to the students the reasons

**‘Grades freeze
children into
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mode
rather than
“task-related”
mode’.**

Figure 1: An adaptation of Shirley Clarke's 'Three and One' formative marking strategy

Phase 1

At the very beginning of new work/assignment/enquiry explain to the class that you will be changing the way you will mark their written work in order to help them make more progress in the future.

Phase 2

Read all of the student's written work through very carefully before making any annotation. Next highlight three places in the writing where the student best met the learning intention(s) of the activity. Then indicate with a star where an improvement can be made to the original work.

Phase 3

Draw an arrow to a suitable space near the star and write a 'close the gap' prompt to support the student in making an improvement to their work. This can be provided in a variety of different forms:

Reminder prompt

most suitable for higher attaining students.

e.g. Say more about

e.g. Explain why you think this

Scaffold prompt

suitable for most students as it provides more structure to improve the work.

e.g. A Question – Can you explain why Harold's army were tired ?

e.g. A Directive – Describe some of the preparations made by William which show that he was well organised.

e.g. An unfinished sentence – William showed he was a skillful battlefield commander when he

Example prompt

particularly supportive of lower attaining students.

e.g. Choose one of these statements and/or create your own.

Harold was unlucky because he had fought another battle against Norwegians.

Or

Harold had a lot of bad luck particularly having to fight William soon after the Battle of Stamford Bridge.

Phase 4

Ensure that you provide time in class to enable students to read and respond to the 'close the gap' comment. This could also provide a suitable time to follow up individual needs with specific students 'face to face'. Finally, remember to comment upon their improvement at the first available opportunity.

Why Did The Normans Win The Battle of Hastings?

When Edward the Confessor died in 1066 he left no heir to the throne. Three people all wanted to become King. In the end William won the battle. In this essay I will tell you why. The paragraphs shall be:

- Bad Luck
- Leadership skills
- William's personality
- Conclusion

Harold's bad luck was one of the reasons why William won the Battle of Hastings. Here are some examples. William was already annoyed with Harold for escaping his imprisonment, so he was even more determined to win. **Harold and his troops also had to fight two battles in 17 days. One at Stamford Bridge and the other at Hastings, His troops were already tired before they met William at Hastings.** Lastly, Harold got shot in the eye and died – very unlucky!

William was a skilled and experienced military leader with excellent tactical knowledge. Some historians believe that William deliberately made his army retreat, so that Harold's army would break their strong shield. While Harold's army were chasing them they regrouped and killed them all. This was all William's idea. **His infantry soldiers were highly trained and the cavalry rode specially bred horses. The soldiers were also equipped with chain mail armour to give them protection in battle.**

William was a wise man (and great man but took money from people for no reason, apart from the fact he had a greed for wealth. He supported the Pope and was kind to the people who were Christians. However he could be ruthless towards people who did not believe in God. William was very stern and put anyone in prison that acted against the law. He stopped houses being built over woodland for William loved nature his favourite animal was the tall stags.)

There are many reasons why William won The Battle of Hastings. **However, I believe that if Harold's army had been fresh at the Battle of Hastings he would have had a much better chance of winning and becoming king.** I also think Harold should have won because he was related to Edward the Confessor, he was an important Englishman. Whereas William only supported the Pope and was a good Soldier.

Feedback

Anne - A well structured answer with a topic sentence to start most paragraphs - you explained clearly why Harold's army were at a disadvantage at Hastings. You also presented your own opinion in the conclusion - well done

*Target - This paragraph needs to be linked more closely to the question - the words underlined in **black** are probably not needed. Anne could you try to finish this sentence please. Then add some evidence from the previous paragraph.*

e.g. William was a wise and determined man who carefully planned his attempt to

Student response

.....claim the throne of England. He took great care over his invasion preparations. He made sure his army was well equiped with chain mail, good horses and plenty of food.

for the new activity or methodology, as Clarke predicted (see Figure 1, Phase 1).

Despite this and other challenges, not least a new way of working, many of the teachers involved were positive in their response to comments only marking: 'it helps to focus and direct my marking in a more purposeful manner', 'I no longer worry about correcting every spelling and concentrate on the quality of their historical thinking' and a bonus for all overworked teachers: 'the department now only marks five or six key pieces of work in each year'.

As for the students themselves, after some initial concern about the lack of a level, they appeared to enjoy and value the opportunity to reflect formatively on their work. Their responses in Figures 2 and 3 show how they were challenged and how they re-evaluated their work as a result of the feedback. Whilst feedback of this rigour cannot be provided for every piece of work, if we identify the key milestones and develop the students' skills of

actively engaging in self-evaluation against the success criteria, the marking burden may be considerably reduced in later years. If we are truly committed to establishing lifelong learners, then feedback needs to cultivate an independent approach to learning and an ability both to self-assess and to use feedback to move on.

It's a far cry from number crunching.

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4. DFES (2003) *Key Stage 3 National Strategy Assessment for Learning Training Folder* DFES Publications
5. *ibid.* Unit 4, p2
6. Clarke, S. *op. cit.* p 64
7. Clarke, S. *op. cit.* p 56
8. The term 'Key Elements' refers to what is formally known as 'Knowledge, skills and understanding' in the current History National Curriculum.

Figure 3

Why did William win the Battle of Hastings

William won the Battle of Hastings because he was better prepered and he waited for the writ time.

First Harold Godwinsons Army was attacked by Hardrada. Then Godwinson came back for more and killed Hardrada. **Then He went to Hastings with no rest to fight the Normans.**

The Norman Army were ready for war. And Harold came to the top of the hill. William ran up the Hill with all is might but he was pushed down. He used the retreat trick. He ran away the English chased him surrounded him he turned and shot Godwinson in the eye and he died.

Feedback

Jason - A big point to start off your answer clearly focusing on the question - Yes this was indeed very important in helping William win the battle - the retreat trick was a very clever tactic in the battle - well identified.

Target - Jason it would be really useful to add a conclusion to this answer. Which of these two examples do you prefer or can you write your own ?

Example 1 - The main reason William won was because poor Harold had to fight two battles in a short space of time.

Example 2 - I think William won for lots of different reasons. However I think the most significant factor was his skilful leadership during the battle.

Your Idea -

Student response

In fact I think that Harold bad luck plus the tricks william used in the battle both were the same importance.