Feedback in the Geography Classroom: Developing the use of assessment for learning

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If improvement in work is to take place, learners must first know the purpose of the task, then how far this has been achieved and finally be given help to know how to close any gap there is between their current attainment and where they want to be (Sadler, 1989).

Feedback from teachers is an essential part of assessment for learning. It has been demonstrated in a number of research projects that effective feedback is one of the most helpful methods for helping students learn, but many teachers have found it difficult to change their approaches to teaching and marking. This article describes some ways that feedback can be used to promote learning.

Marking

Marking is probably the most common form of feedback used by teachers. Marks are used to sum up students' work. They are a quick recording device for the teacher, often simply meaning 'has done the work asked and got most of it correct'. There is no sense here that learning is involved. Some reasons for not using marks are that:

- students rarely read comments, preferring to compare marks with peers;
- teachers rarely give students time in class to read comments that are written on work and probably few, if any, students return to consider these at home;
- often the comments are brief and do not give suggestions about how to improve work;
- the same written comments frequently recur in a student's book, implying that students do not take note of or act on the comments.

These reasons suggest that much of the time teachers spend marking is wasted because it has little impact on learning.

Experience has also shown that in many schools the marking culture is difficult to change.

> *The majority of teachers mark extremely conscientiously. However many schools need to review why and how they mark work to ensure that the significant amount of time teachers devote to it is more effectively used* (Suffolk Advisory Service, 2002, quoted in Depper, 2004).

Dylan Wiliam has commented that:

> *At present a teacher will typically spend more time marking a student's work than the student will spend following it up – which suggests that the teacher's work is less valuable!* (Wiliam, 2002).

Written comments

Written comments are the most common way for the teacher to have a dialogue with everyone in the class, but most comments are either unhelpful or not used by students. This is the central dilemma in changing practice. Teachers therefore have to develop strategies that make comments more effective in developing students' learning and find ways to engage the students in the dialogue.

Comments take a long time to write and for some activities are of little use. If the task is to draw and label a diagram of the structure of the rainforest, then there is little to comment on. Such tasks simply need checking to ensure learners have transferred the information from their textbook or the board into their own books. Checking does not usually need teacher expertise and so for this type of task it is possible to use self-checking, peer-assessment, or sample checking by the teacher of perhaps a third of the books each week. Finding the right balance between comment-marking and checking work not only provides the time for devising useful comments, it begins to move the responsibility for involvement in assessment onto the shoulders of the learners. This is an important step towards the development and encouragement of self-assessment.

Useful comments, written every two to three weeks, are more helpful than a mark on every piece of work. Some activities are easier to comment on than others, particularly those that are challenging and require reasoning rather than simple recall. Teachers can manage the process by reassessing their schemes of work to ensure that there are enough of these types of activity reasonably spaced throughout the topic. This makes the marking load more manageable for the teachers, provides regular guidance to the students, and at the same time provides students with the opportunity to work on improvement before the next detailed feedback.

Feedback can be given most usefully on tasks that require more extended writing. This is because these tasks provide the teacher with a richer source of evidence about the learning of individual students so more focused advice on their work can be given. Examples of appropriate tasks might be:

- Why are floodplains poor locations for housing?
- Why is the human cost of a disaster greater in LEDCs, while the economic cost is higher in MEDCs?
- Where would you be most likely to experience a multi-cultural environment? Where might you encounter mono-cultures?

While initially there might be some resistance to the increase in writing, experience has shown that students quickly come to realise that these types of activity provide the starting point for the teacher to coach them towards higher attainment.

Effective comments

Questions are useful ways of framing comments. Compare these two comments:

1. Add notes on the pattern of population density.
2. Where are the most crowded and least crowded places? Can you suggest why some places are more crowded (densely populated) than others?

Whereas the first comment gives the student a task to perform to improve his or her work, the second comment initiates thinking immediately. This enables the learner to discuss his or her thoughts either with the teacher or a peer and its questioning nature encourages the student to initiate improvement.

Targets are another effective way of giving feedback and the more focused the target the better. Try to avoid

Is Deforestation good or bad for our world?
Deforestation is bad for our world because it is cutting down the majority of our trees to make paper and other things such as furniture including tables, chairs, bookcases and many more things. They cut down trees to make new roads in the rain forest and it kills many species of animals that need the trees to survive on. These people are wrecking the rarest animals around the world to make it easier for the different tribes to get around the rainforest. It is not fair to these animals for their natural home to be wrecked.

Praise comment
You have described both the reasons for cutting down trees and the effects on animals. Giving examples shows your knowledge of the topic.

Points for improvement
1. Check your facts - are the roads made for the tribes? - Who builds them and why? Please rewrite this sentence.
2. You're only commented on one aspect of deforestation - a better answer would mention at least 2 or 3. Give one more reason why deforestation is harmful; for example, how does it affect local tribes or the variety of plant species in the rainforest?

Figure 1: Annotations of a student's work using effective comments.

general statements as in the first example above. Points that need to be considered next time may be useful but comments that prompt immediate action, such as those below, are better.

Well done John, you've chosen an appropriate graph to present the results.

Now can you refer to the graph when describing the pattern?

Can you make your description more precise by including percentages?

In many cases, an effective comment relates back to the success criteria or descriptions of quality that have been shared with or devised by the students before they attempt a task. In this way, students work towards success or quality by considering the criteria as their work progresses. The feedback is then the teacher's judgement which can be matched against the student's own

judgement of quality. For example, suppose a student is asked:

How does globalisation in the fashion industry affect people at a local level? What happens if the chain is broken?

What is needed is:
- A comparison of your experiences of the global fashion industry with that of the factory workers at the start of the chain: the advantages and disadvantages of globalisation for consumers and producers.
- A description of how a break in the chain will affect different people's lives.
- An explanation of the interdependence between global and local effects.

Effective comments that relate to these criteria might be:

You have described the different experiences of the consumer and producer. You have listed some advantages and disadvantages. Now you need to write a paragraph that summarises these and includes the terms globalisation, producer and consumer.

What might happen if people in Britain chose only to buy clothes produced in Britain?

Sometimes directing students where to go for help and what to do to improve can be effective:

Look back at the map and use the atlas to give the names of countries where there are car factories

Go back to the picture and look for three more features that you can describe. For each one suggest why it is like that or ask a geographical question about it.

'You are mixing up the terms primary, secondary and tertiary industry. First check your glossary for explanations of these terms, then see if you can rewrite this paragraph using the terms correctly.

Some good points made about interdependence. Now you need to give more precise examples. Take a look at how Anil has done this and ask him to help you improve this piece.

Creating the improving classroom

The opportunity to react to and act on comments is essential, particularly when formative ideas are being introduced to classes. The learners need to see that the teacher really does want a piece of work improved and that improvement is being monitored. This means providing an opportunity in lesson time for students to read comments on their work and to discuss with their teacher or their peers which specific improvements are needed. In some instances, it is also useful to allow time for the improvements to be made in class.

The ultimate user of assessment information is the learner and the culture needed in the classroom to support and encourage the learner is one of success, backed by a belief that all can achieve. While this can help all students, it gives particularly good results with low attainers, where it concentrates on specific problems with their work. One method of finding the correct balance and tone to encourage redrafting and further improvement is 'two stars and a wish'. For example:

This work shows you have good locational knowledge and can draw neat accurate maps. Now you need to describe the pattern that the map shows using geographical terms such as north, south, clustered and dispersed.

Figure 1 gives a second example of an effective comment. In this case there is one praise comment and two suggestions for improvements.

A third example involves reading 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. 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. These prompts can be provided in a variety of forms:

Reminder Prompt

Most suitable for higher attaining students, for example:

■ Say more about ... (why a rain shadow occurs).

Scaffold Prompt

Suitable for most students as it provides more structure to improve the work, for example:

■ A question – Can you explain why it rains over mountains?
■ A directive – Describe why the West of Great Britain is wetter than the East

■ An unfinished sentence – Wales is wetter than East Anglia because...

Example Prompt

Particularly supportive of lower attaining students, for example:

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

Mountains are wetter because when air is forced to rise over them it cools and the water vapour in it condenses into water droplets.

or

More rain falls on mountains near the sea because air blowing from the sea contains more moisture.

The final part of the process involves the students' engaging with the comment. Ensure that you provide time in class to enable students to read and respond to the 'close the gap' comment. This time could also be used to follow up individual needs with specific students face-to-face. Finally, remember to comment upon their improvement at the first available opportunity (adapted from Clarke, 2005). ■

References and further reading

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