

Talking about assessment

Aidan describes how his department developed a system for assessing progress in geography at key stage 3.



Accompanying
online materials

'What do you have to do to make progress, Luke?'

'Get a 5a.'

In *The Power of Feedback* John Hattie and Helen Timperley (2007, p. 86) identify three fundamental questions that should drive assessment and feedback in schools: 'Where am I going?' (What are the goals?); 'How am I going?' (What progress is being made towards the goals?) and 'Where to next?' (What should we do to make more progress?). Now, at last, we have the opportunity to ask them. The abandonment of 'levels' in the 2014 National Curriculum gives us the opportunity to design something actually fit-for-purpose. It enables us to create assessment systems that really benefit our students, rather than fulfil the requirements of our leadership teams for ever more data. Although Hattie and Timperley (*ibid.*) were writing long before the recent curriculum review they provide a robust justification for change:

Too often, assessments are used to provide snapshots of learning rather than information that can be used by students or their teachers to address the three feedback questions ... most current assessments provide minimal feedback, too often because they rely on recall and are used as external accountability thermometers rather than as feedback devices that are integral to the teaching and learning process. It is the feedback information and interpretations from assessments, not the numbers or grades, that matter (ibid., p. 104).

But how many schools will take this opportunity to create something radically different; something that works better? Or will they merely replace numerical levels with other grading systems? In their summary of recommendations, the NAHT (2014, p. 6) says that student progress and achievement 'should be communicated in terms of *descriptive profiles* rather than condensed to *numerical summaries*' (added emphasis).

The following story charts the changes in our department since the announcement of 'assessing without levels'.

Assessing without numbers

Shortly after the end of levels was announced our department began thinking of a new structure or method of assessment. We knew we'd have to do it sooner or later, and we were keen to get rid of the numbers straight away. We had known for a long time that test results – especially percentages – could not be reduced to a level (see Weeden and Hopkin, 2014), but also that these numbers were obfuscating the real value of assessment; students focussed on the grade rather than what was

needed for further progress. As a first step we just did away with the numbers, but the original level descriptors were still too lengthy and complicated. We eventually developed a progression framework which, after trialling and redrafting, was concise, accessible to our students (with coaching here and there), and had no numbers on it. So how do we use it? The answer is everywhere!

Over the last few years we have found the best reflection of a student's capabilities as a geographer is through embedded assessment, by building up a portfolio of evidence (aka an exercise book) that illustrates their 'level', rather than summative tests. Furthermore, continuous assessment provides the opportunity for students to 'master' particular skills and competences while giving them time to build knowledge. Indeed, this is intrinsic to becoming a better geographer, and revisiting previous work should be embedded in the learning praxis. Following Jerome Bruner (1960; best articulated in Rawling (2007)) we think about learning as a spiral; students are encouraged to re-engage with what they have already learnt. This also means that student progress in using particular geographical knowledge and skills is positively reinforced: 'I can do this'. By evidencing their knowledge on the framework students can see the progress they are making.

Targets

I don't think anything else has been so damaging to our students' progress. Even under our new assessment structure, I still cannot find a robust and accurate way to say that a student should be at a particular destination (level) by a certain period in their education. I don't think it's possible and I don't know how it benefits the students. Of course, by not having targets or numeric levels we can't draw a graph with a nice upward-sweeping curve. But does that really help students progress? For example, some students find weather and climate a difficult topic, but excel in debating water access in Africa; others vice versa: so their progress on a graph would appear as a jagged, fluctuating and disorganised affair. But our new assessment structure – the spiral – accounts for, and even embraces, this fluctuation: it shows our students 'always achieving' rather than 'never quite meeting'.

The journey

The crux of our new assessment structure is the journey itself, not the target or level. As geography teachers we are attempting to inspire our students to become better geographers, to help shape their interpretation of the world through the use of different geographical lenses, frameworks or modes of understanding. To try to capture that essence our department has

ditched the ubiquitous 'learning objectives' and 'outcomes' in favour of 'routes' and 'destinations': we hope that at the end of their travels our students will be better geographers.

To this end we are working with a key stage 3 curriculum that ensures all students have equal access to challenging geography. The idea is that students become better geographers because their progress is engendered by the curriculum itself, not by targets and levels. As Biddulph (2014, p. 8) has suggested, 'a process curriculum has at its core a commitment to developing understanding rather than 'delivering' content or meeting targets' (see also Bennetts, 2008; and Farmer, 2011). Students can only progress if they have the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding, and the progress framework is a great way for them to do this.

A different language

A further fundamental change for our department has been the language we use on a day-to-day basis. Students don't work; they learn. We don't talk of ability; we nurture capabilities. We don't write schemes of work; we design opportunities for teaching. We don't do marking, but feedback. Students talk about achievement, and if they haven't quite got the gist of something, they haven't failed, they just haven't mastered it yet. Dweck's (2012) 'growth mindset' approach has been revelatory, and the oft-forgotten topic of student motivation is at the forefront of our practice. What more can we ask of our students if they (and we) are putting in maximum effort and responding to each other's feedback, creating a dialogue about geography? The old numerical targets become superfluous.

Our department's curriculum methodology has the following aims:

- to give students a transparent progression framework based on geographical knowledge and skills
- to embed assessment as a productive, continuous and reflective process throughout the geography journey
- to enact several types of assessment: assessment *of* learning, assessment *for* learning, and – especially – assessment *as* learning
- to provide students with opportunities, through the assessment framework, to show that they are becoming better geographers without attaching numbers to them
- to promote clear and concise feedback at various levels: self-assessment, peer-assessment and teacher assessment
- to give students opportunities to respond to feedback; feedback is not given to students but negotiated and received.

Assessing without numbers

Start with the framework

Adopt or create a progression framework that illustrates the process of becoming a better geographer. This should inform everything you do. Our framework is available to download.

Designing your curriculum

Design your curriculum around your progression framework, not vice versa. Learning routes should be taken directly from the framework but adapted to suit the topic being studied. Units should build on the knowledge and skills detailed in the framework, and become more challenging over time. Early on in key stage 3 students will probably be working around the lower rows of the framework, and later nearer the top (it functions similarly to the learning ladders in Harris, 2015). Figure 1 shows how we have designed a year 8 learning cycle based on sustainable development in the least developed countries (focussing on sub-Saharan Africa).

Make the learning process accessible

Ensure that students who are still developing basic capabilities can achieve through the tasks, while stretching others with more challenging knowledge and skills. This allows students to make as much progress as they are capable of, and ensures that the geography is appropriate to all. The tasks for the final enquiry question in the learning cycle from Figure 1 are shown in Figure 2.

Enhance the power of metacognition

When you introduce assessment as learning, build in time for students to see their progress according to the framework. Teaching is key; teach students how to use the framework. Refer to the learning routes at the beginning of a cycle and ask them to find the relevant point on the framework. Ensure that they track their progress as they go: in our system, students use page numbers to reference evidence of their progress (an example is available to download).

Build in time for reflection

Use plenty of self-assessment and peer-assessment, but critique their efficacy. Again, students will need to be taught how to assess effectively. Get them to proof-read before constructing feedback for them. Crucially, allow them time to respond to feedback and improve their articles; this reduces the time-lag between feedback and progress (Figure 3).

Key questions	Learning routes
1. What is development?	Describe development around the world and begin to explain how places become developed.
2. How developed is the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)?	Describe in detail the physical and human characteristics of the DRC.
3. What does poverty look like?	Describe how the lives of people living in the least developed countries are affected by poverty.
4. How can development in the poorest countries be sustainable?	Evaluate the sustainability of development in the DRC.

Figure 1: The year 8 unit for 'Will some countries always be poor?'. The learning routes are adaptations of statements on the progression framework. These learning routes also offer opportunities to cover other ground; for example, the tasks involved in key question 2 prompt students to compare the DRC to other countries.

Figure 2: Differentiation through tasks: the key question 'How can development in the poorest countries be sustainable?' is an opportunity for students to use their geographical knowledge in other ways, for example, comparing places, analysing the features of places, and drawing on their existing knowledge.

Figure 3: A student article on 'How can development in the poorest countries be sustainable?' This took several hours and several drafts but illustrates a deep understanding of development and sustainability. Subsequent feedback questions and responses aimed at further refinement.

Online resources

The progression framework used at Bourne Grammar School and a student sample are available to download. Go to www.geography.org.uk/tg and click Spring 2016.



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Core

Why is the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) one of the least developed countries in the world?

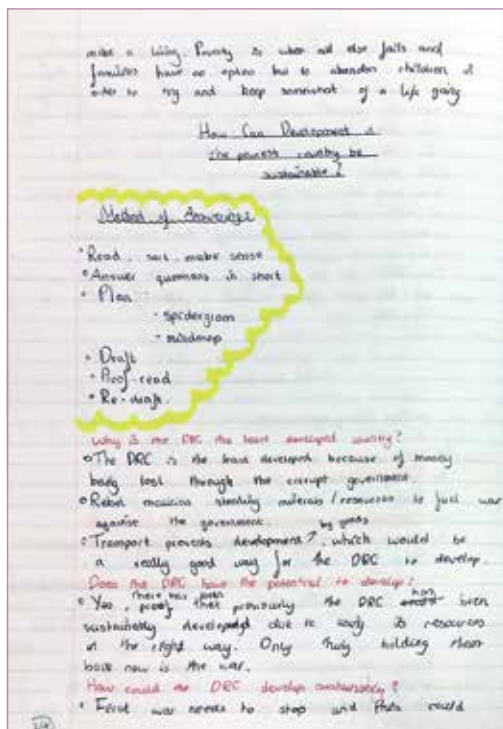
What potential is there for development in the DRC?

Extension

How could the DRC develop sustainably?

Challenge

Drawing on your existing knowledge, compare the DRC to other places.



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Stress the importance of deep learning

The DfE have spoken at great length about this (DfE, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). Our department no longer design three-part lessons; achievement and progress is not measured in one hour lesson slots. Focusing on depth rather than breadth will maximise outcomes and students will soon see the reward. For example, it is absolutely fine to spend several hours on one essay that really develops analytical and communication skills.

The GA has published a wealth of material that is hugely beneficial to the process of devising an assessment system, particularly their framework with benchmark expectations (see www.geography.org.uk/news/2014nationalcurriculum/assessment). We also found the advice from David Gardner on the Assessing without levels CPD course invaluable.

Conclusion

In developing this new structure over the past year we have made lots of mistakes, and the transition has not always been smooth. For example, our former year 9 students took a long time to get to grips with the new system. Also, our progress framework is quite abstract in its articulation, and students need time and guidance to make sense of it. Other departments are following our lead, and we are now working towards a display of exemplary articles to demonstrate students' progress in geography. Our next challenge will be to communicate this progress to parents.

We are, however, absolutely convinced that our assessment framework has enhanced the quality of the geography in our classrooms. Students have a deeper geographical understanding, and really are thinking like geographers. They are also more autonomous, motivated, and enthusiastic about the subject, and now have a language for talking authentically about learning geography. And at last, we can now ask the right questions about learning, assessment, and feedback. | **TG**