

## GTIP Orientation Piece – Marking work (Graham Butt, 2008)

*The short answer to the question ‘We don’t have to mark every piece of students work do we?’ is no. Here Graham Butt (School of Education, University of Birmingham) discusses the ways in which marking and assessment of student’s work should become part of the dialogue between teachers and students.*

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### Introduction

The day-to-day marking of students’ work can create a dialogue between the teacher and the learner. Many different forms of marking are used - each has its own conventions having been devised for the purposes of either motivating, informing or censuring the individual who receives the information. ‘Marks’ of a student’s work are most helpful if they both assess what has been attained and help the student to understand what is required to perform and learn better in the future.

Hopkin outlines the main teacher activity when adopting formative assessment strategies in the classroom as follows:

- ) watching and listening to students as they work
- ) questioning, discussing or reviewing work with students
- ) marking students’ work, perhaps alongside them
- ) students reflecting on and assessing their own work
- ) agreeing ‘what next’ with students, that is, short term targets to improve their work (Hopkin, 2000, p. 39).

### Considering performance

When marking students’ work it is worth considering how the assessment of performance will have consequences for their future learning - what Gipps (1994) refers to as ‘consequential validity’. Additionally, does choosing not to mark a piece of the students’ work, or marking it in a different way, create any significant consequence for their future learning? How do we make sure that our marking does have a formative effect on student learning?

Well, there are a number of considerations, including:

1. The criteria against which students' work is assessed should be clearly communicated and understood. Both 'assessor' and 'assessed' should be 'talking the same assessment language'. The assessment criteria should link back to the learning objectives stated for the lesson.
1. The reason why marks have been awarded (or withheld) should be made clear to the student. What the marks are awarded for should be mutually understood. Often teachers award marks for attainment and/or effort. But how do they know what effort a student has really made on a piece of work? Can we compare one student's efforts with another? What does it mean to a student to be awarded high marks for effort but low for attainment; or vice versa?
2. What and how you are going to mark needs to have been considered when planning the lesson. Will you concentrate on the students' grasp of geographical content? Or skills? Will you give credit for presentation? Will marks be taken away for poor spelling, punctuation and grammar? Do you intend to provide a written comment on each piece of work? To 'say' what? Is the student expected to respond to your comment? Will he or she understand what is being communicated?
3. The next educational steps should be apparent to the student. He or she should know, from the comments and marks on a piece of assessed work, what has to be done to progress in terms of learning and attainment.
4. At the end of the assessment process the teacher should be confident about why he or she has awarded each particular mark to each student. It is a professional responsibility to know, and to be able to explain or justify, why this mark has been given to this piece of work.

It is not necessary to mark every piece of work in the same way, or to the same depth. There is a danger of over assessment if everything the student does is closely assessed. Some students' work merely has to be 'acknowledged' by the teacher as having been completed, usually by placing a 'tick' next to it.

The focus for the assessment should vary at times and any change of assessment focus should be made clear to the students. It is better to assess less work to a high standard, than to mark all work superficially. Many geography departments also devise 'key assessment tasks' to assess the main aspects of a unit of work being studied.

Marking is a time consuming and sometimes tedious activity for many teachers. If it has no 'consequential validity' - then it is a fruitless exercise. But reliable assessment information is highly valued and sought after. Heads of department and inspectors are interested in how students perform, parents are often anxious to know how their child is progressing and the students themselves value the feedback that marking provides. Most geography departments have a marking policy which outlines for teachers, students and parents the principles by which work is assessed, monitored, recorded and reported upon. This ensures consistency in assessment practice and conveys a commitment to the principles of formative assessment.

### **Monitoring, recording and reporting**

The monitoring, recording and reporting of assessment information must consider two important questions:

1. Is the process of monitoring, recording and reporting manageable, consistent and understandable?
2. Does the information collected impact positively on the process of teaching and learning?

In essence these are considerations of purpose. It is only sensible to spend time and effort monitoring, recording and reporting assessment information if it is going to have a positive impact. Mark books full of grades, comments and symbols may look impressive, but if the data recorded serves little or no purpose there is no point in collecting it.

Whatever system is used to record assessment information it should ideally be capable of:

- ) providing accurate information about each student's knowledge, understanding and skills in geography that can be readily understood by students, teachers and parents
- ) simple aggregation into a synoptic assessment of each student's level(s) of attainment
- ) reflecting a variety of modes of assessment, each of which give specific information on different aspects of each student's attainment
- ) creation into a form that can usefully be reported to, for example, parents' evenings or department meetings
- ) flexibility, such that valid and reliable assessment information can be extracted for different audiences at different times (assessment information that is 'fit for purpose').

Perhaps the most powerful and substantial record of each student's daily performance is often carried in the teacher's head. Here the impressions, observations, feelings, and attitudes of the teacher to each student, based on their classroom presence (both academic and behavioural), are amassed in a holistic form. Teachers add to this 'assessment record' every time they teach, modifying it slightly as new ephemeral evidence is presented in the classroom.

### **The use of portfolios**

Portfolios provide a means of collecting a sample of students' work in geography which exemplify the standards of work produced in a school or department (Howes, 1996, 2000). They can be used as a basis for making level judgements in geography at key stage 3 and to provide evidence for monitoring progression in achievement. Although there is no obligation to collect work in this way the resulting portfolios, either of the work of individuals or groups whose work exemplifies attainment of a particular level, help to support the 'levelling' process. Portfolios can be used in combination with exemplification materials produced by QCA.

Howes (2000) lists three different types of portfolios: departmental/levels, individual and class.

**Geography department portfolio, key stage 'levels' portfolio** - designed to provide exemplars of students' work completed on a range of different activities against which consistent judgements of performance can be made. Such portfolios exemplify the department's beliefs about the standards which need to be achieved for the award of a particular level.

**Individual student portfolios** - a selection of exemplars of a particular student's achievements. These portfolios should see a 'turnover' of work (i.e. be updated frequently) and be used to support summative assessments of performance or as the focus of discussion with the student, other teachers and/or parents to help the formative development of that student.

**Class portfolios** - to provide a record of the activities and achievements of a particular class and to aid the curriculum review process. Common assessment activities, used across a year group, might be collected into a class portfolio to enable comparisons across teaching groups.

Portfolios have a range of audiences and purposes and can:

- ) serve as a reference point for all teachers in promoting and supporting consistent judgements both during and at the end of a key stage
- ) be used as a focus for moderation between schools
- ) support new colleagues in informing their understanding and judgements
- ) remove the pressure on individual teachers to build up a collection of work to support their judgements
- ) demonstrate to others (e.g. parents, other teachers, students, governors, Ofsted) the agreed standards of work within the school)  
exemplify progression and support evaluation and review of the school's geography curriculum
- ) include work from a small number of 'case study' students, showing a range of work and attainment, for example, levels 3, 5 and 7 (Howes, 2003, p. 63).

To be most useful the materials collected in portfolios should have a comment sheet attached on which the teacher who has selected the work records the context or focus for the sample.

Annotations recording significant features of the performance of each student, a brief summary to show how the work has fulfilled (or not achieved) expectations, and an indication of how or why the teacher's judgement has been made are also useful. It is advisable to collect just a few pieces of exemplar materials and to annotate them carefully. Students completed self-evaluation slips should also be included in personal portfolios.

## **Conclusion**

In a major review of the recent literature on teacher assessment, Black and Wiliam (1998) conclude that student learning responds most effectively to frequent formative assessment. Of equal importance is the ability of students to reflect on their own performance and to be able to picture their learning in terms of what they need to do to improve. Unfortunately, according to Black and Wiliam, the current day-to-day assessment practices in the classroom do not generally address either of these goals because:

- ) superficial rote learning often takes place, with classroom assessment based on the recall of details of knowledge which students soon forget
- ) teachers fail to review the forms of assessment used, do not discuss practices with other teachers and rarely reflect on what is being assessed
- ) there is an over-emphasis on grading and an under-emphasis on learning

- ) there is a tendency to use normative rather than criterion-referenced assessment systems
- ) through their assessment methods teachers emphasise competition rather than personal achievement and performance
- ) assessment methods tend to reinforce perceptions of failure amongst lower achievers, leading to de-motivation and a loss of confidence in their ability to learn
- ) dominance of external, summative testing remains the norm.

It is worth remembering that assessment is best defined as an 'art' rather than a 'science'.

### **Bibliography**

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Gipps, C. (1994) *Beyond Testing: Towards a theory of educational assessment*. London: Falmer.

Hopkin, J. (2000) 'Day-to-day assessment' in Hopkin, J., Telfer, S. and Butt, G. (eds) *Assessment in Practice: Raising standards in secondary geography*. Sheffield: Geographical Association. pp. 37-45.

(A practical account of how to manage assessment in the geography classroom on a daily basis. Illustrates how to apply principles of formative assessment to the planning and delivery of different forms of assessment, indicating how marking policies can support the process.)

Howes, N. (1996) 'The portfolio as a key stage 3 assessment tool', *Teaching Geography*, 21, 3, pp. 143-5. (An introduction to the main principles of using portfolios of students' work in geography assessment in the national curriculum.)

Howes, N. (2000) 'Long term, summative assessment and evaluation: portfolios' in Hopkin, J., Telfer, S. and Butt, G. (eds) *Assessment in Practice: Raising standards in secondary geography*. Sheffield: Geographical Association. pp. 60-9. (Explores and discusses the use of different forms of portfolio within geography, particularly with respect to monitoring progression in achievement and 'levelling' students' work. Suggestions for professional development activities to support geography teachers in the introduction of portfolios.)