

# What – no grades? An action research project in assessment for learning

How would students react if you gave them feedback instead of grades? Would their performance improve or deteriorate? **Rebecca Rhodes** reports on the research she did with her A level students.



Teaching at Farnborough Sixth Form College has exposed me to several new and innovative practices that fall under the umbrella of Teaching for Learning. I was particularly impressed and enthusiastic about assessment for learning and the differences between formative and summative assessing.

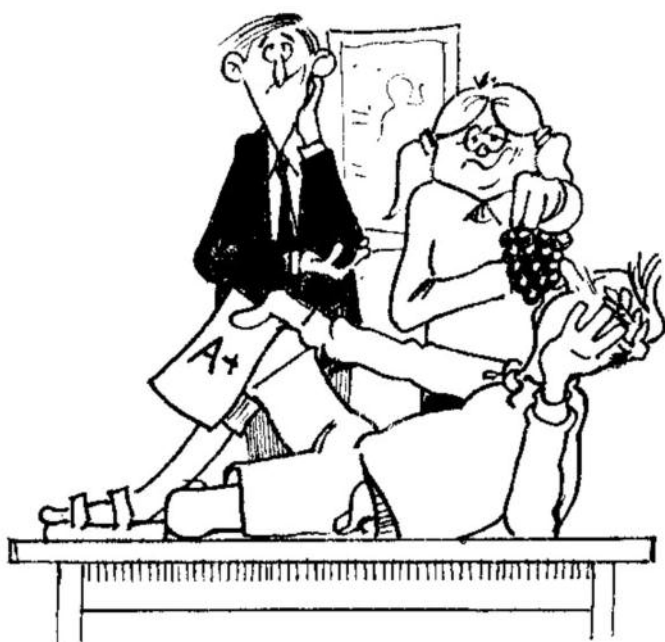
I remember when I was at school my teachers would often provide me with a grade and nothing more. I was one of those capable students who worked really hard to do my best. To be told I'd received a B meant that I had more to do, but I never fully knew what exactly I'd done wrong or what I needed to do to improve. Even today, my students tell me they have teachers who only give them grades, and they are just as confused as I was.

## How the project started

This project investigated the effectiveness of formative assessment, with emphasis placed on feedback at the A2 level as it was the upper sixth cohort that I felt was being excluded from this form of assessment. Ironically, the most resistance to the idea of not giving grades came more from teaching colleagues than from the students themselves. This was often due to the fear that the students were embarking on their exams before heading off to higher education and it was too big a gamble to take. This argument frustrated me, and motivated me further.

Reflecting upon the written feedback I gave my students I wondered if there was more I could do that might encourage them to view assessments as being a journey towards enhanced learning rather than a conclusion to a topic. I also knew from experience that my students were more preoccupied with the grade than with the time I'd put in to writing on their work. They weren't reading it, or if they were, they were doing nothing with it.

I quickly came to realise that successful feedback is best treated as a learning process that is also fluid between assessments. First, the



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teacher should try to provide constructive and clear guidance not only on what needs to improve, but how this can be done. Second, the student should have the opportunity to respond to these comments by engaging with, and applying them to that very same assessment in order to aid and improve their learning and understanding of that advice.

With this in mind I developed my objectives for this project. My aims for my A2 psychology action research students were that they would:

- improve their essay writing skills if they are provided with detailed and specific feedback (orally [one to one] and written)
- improve their essay writing skills if targets are set and they have allotted time to improve upon their work
- begin to focus on assessments as a learning process and regard them as less threatening.

At this stage it is worth pointing out that when I refer to grades, I also mean percentages and marks.

## Feedback versus grades: theoretical background

Self esteem and learning is a very powerful combination. Black *et al.* (2002) make reference to the fact that if feedback is given as a grade it will enhance the students' egos rather than make them reflect upon the

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actual work itself. Grades lead students to compare themselves with others, focussing on their image and status rather than reflecting upon the work they have just had returned and considering how they could improve it. It focuses on the student's *ability* rather than *effort*, which can damage the self esteem of low achievers. If students are

given only very detailed feedback that clearly targets specific areas, it forces them to look at what they can do to improve, which enhances learning. This directly fosters an environment where all learners can succeed, as they are able to build upon previous work (assessments) through the feedback provided, therefore knowing what steps need to be taken in order to improve.

Another previous study offering similar support was by Kluger and DeNisi (1996), who commented in their review on feedback that often when students were told they had done well or badly, it had an effect on their egos but it did not increase their involvement with the task. Most recently, Stobart (2006) summarises key features of feedback and the negative effect it has on students – for example, learning is likely to stop when a summative grade is awarded. Another factor was that grades affect the learners' egos (by reconciling the mark with a view of themselves as learners) and can lead to a focus on success in comparison with fellow class mates rather than on the learning process. This especially has an effect on students who get low grades.

Progress is another facet of learning. High achievers can become focussed on maintaining their position of success so that they lose focus on the learning process and how they can improve. How often have you heard a student say, 'I'm happy with this grade' or 'I got what I wanted'? Butler (1988) found that learning gains were greatest for year 7 pupils who were only given comments compared to her other two groups, which were given either marks only or marks with comments. These two groups showed no gains. Butler found that students ignore comments when marks are also provided. A more recent study by Harlen (2006) concluded that feedback is most effective when students are involved in the process of setting targets. This encourages an active participation in their own learning rather than being passive and following the advice of the teacher.

Taking these ideas on board, I realised that I had to change *how* I provided feedback and what I wrote on students' work. It also made me realise that returning submitted work as soon as possible was a key factor in making the entire process more effective. By doing this, it was not only helping me become a

*this encourages an active participation in their own learning*

better assessor but most importantly I was attempting to strip away the misconception

my students had about what a grade meant to them and how they could become better and more empowered learners.

## Research method

Two A2 psychology classes were used. My action research group consisted of 17 mixed-ability students (13 females) and my control group consisted of 16 students (8 females). Assessing A2 psychology is done through essay work.

The process was methodical.

1. An essay would be set and the students had one week to complete it.
2. Each essay was marked by completing a feedback sheet that consisted of boxes to check when certain criteria had been met or not. There was additional space for me to provide detailed written feedback on aspects of the essay that had been done particularly well and on areas that needed more focus. I would provide explicit guidance as to what was needed to improve. These were returned within three lessons.
3. Students were given lesson time to read through my feedback and to reflect upon it. They then had to comment on my feedback and their work.
4. Designated lesson time was given so I was able to speak with each student about their work.

5. Three targets were set that were mutually agreed by both teacher and student.
6. The students chose one aspect of their essay that they wanted to improve and were given time to do this.

## Findings

At the start of the year I asked the students *What should a teacher provide you with to enable you to achieve success in their subject (not only psychology)?* There were a range of comments, but most common were:

- one-to-one chats
- avoid just giving ticks, but give comments as well
- a grade is needed as comments are not enough (if I get a C it will make me work harder)
- feedback doesn't have to involve grades, but instead a detailed comment on how to improve
- lots of thorough feedback
- make sure that feedback also emphasises work that has been done well.

Over the course of the year my action research class had a huge shift in their attitude to getting no grades. At the beginning of the year over half the class (8/17) felt that it was important that they received grades on their work, and by the end of the year this had halved. As for the students who were content to receive no grades, this doubled from five initially to 10 by the end of the year.

Further qualitative findings from the class included the following.

- There was overwhelmingly strong support for the quality of written feedback, which the students found helpful, enabling them to know exactly what they needed to do to improve.

- There was overwhelming support for the resubmission of work, as the students found this beneficial even though it meant extra work. However, a vast majority felt that they never made the most of the opportunity and time given to them to improve upon their work.
- Compared to their other subjects, they were getting the most support and feedback from my lessons and this had given them increased confidence.
- Students felt that they were now focusing on the comments, which they hadn't really done before.
- There was a mixed reaction to the power of grades. Some still felt that grades meant praise and that grades allowed them to gauge where they were at. Other students commented on the fact that they felt demoralised in their other subjects when they got a grade, whereas in this class they didn't and that it helped them to learn better.

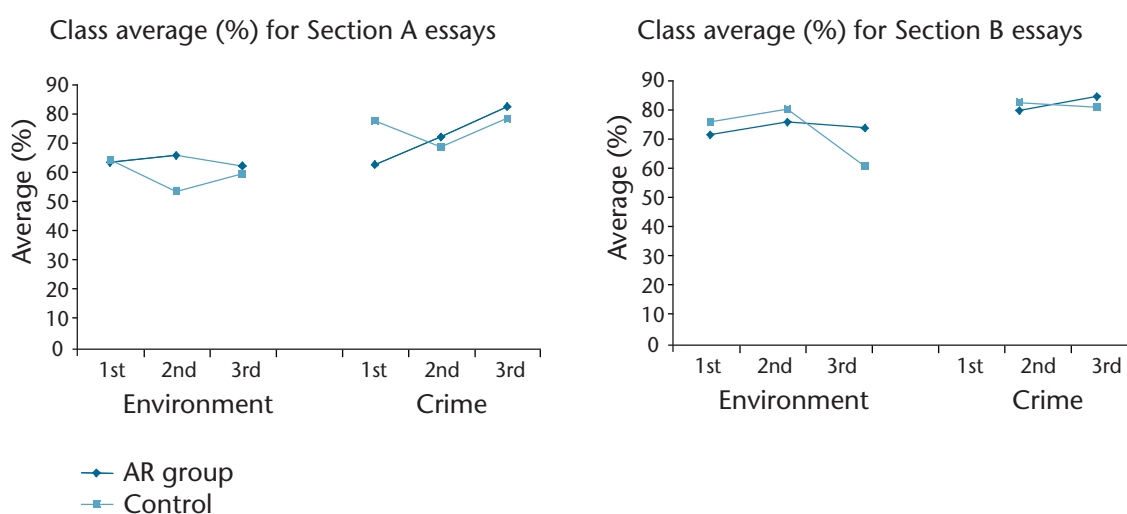
These findings largely support the research I referred to earlier, especially with regard to grades having a direct effect on the ego and self confidence of students.

## Comparison with the control group

I felt that the action research students were taking heed of their own individual progress and were becoming increasingly aware not only of what they needed to do to improve but also of the learning process. When I returned graded assessments to my control class, I would often hear comments from students who would compare their results, spending little time reading my comments. The focus was most definitely a discussion comparing grades, and trying to outdo one another.

But contrary to some of my background research, my action research class did not out perform my control class (see Figure 1). I believe this was because when I started this project very few of my students were aware of assessment for learning. I was exposing them to new concepts as they were reaching the end of their school careers rather than at the start or early stages of it, which meant they were already in routines and habits and had certain schemas that a teacher marks work and they get a grade for it. And often,

**Figure 1** How the two groups performed



Both graphs show the average percentage for each assessment (by essay type) per class. From this it can be seen that my AR class showed steady improvement across all assessments.

change is difficult to adapt to in such a short space of time. I was also inadvertently creating a certain degree of anxiety for some of my students.

## What did I achieve and learn?

I had in fact achieved and learned a great deal.

- Students spent quality time reading feedback and improving upon their work.
- I became more efficient in my marking.
- I learned how to word my feedback so that it was not only highlighting the positives but also providing specific guidance as to what needed to be improved.
- I was able to sit down with students more often in a one-to-one situation, even though this can be very difficult and time consuming with large class sizes.
- Work needs to be returned quickly or else it becomes a distant memory for the students and therefore meaningless when it is returned, making the feedback almost worthless.
- Setting a maximum of three targets meant that students were more focussed on what they had to rectify, rather than rewriting the entire essay again.

I underestimated how disorientating and frustrating receiving no grades could be for some students but at the same time was always surprised when the most conscientious (and often able) of students would admit to feeling demoralized upon receiving grades in other subjects.

Perrenoud (1991) reported that formative assessment requires a shift in students' attitudes toward work. Many students do not have a desire to learn as much as possible, but rather to do the minimum to get by. I believe this could be said of many A2 students, with my action-research students being no exception. Through this project, my attempts at implementing certain ideals

required a significant shift in their attitude and overall commitment. They needed to take a more serious attitude towards their learning and college work. Evidence supporting the fact that they were not willing to alter their work ethic is reflected in many of their comments where they admit that they didn't put a lot of effort in to the resubmissions of work, or even their initial assessments.

## Implications of my results

### For the students

The students did just as well as my other class. However, what they gained by being part of this research was a positive attitude to assessments, the realisation that the grade is less important, and that acting upon feedback is the most effective way for them to gain the self confidence that they know how to, and can, improve their own work.

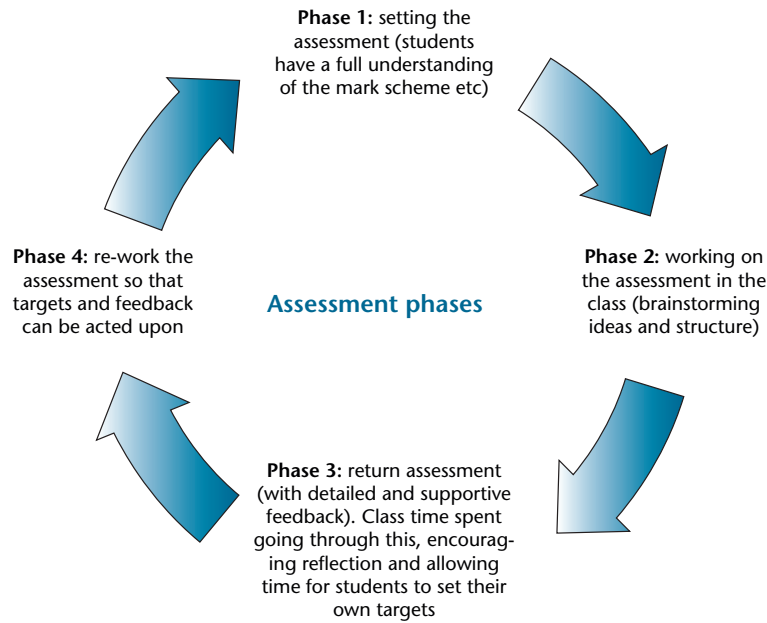
### For my own professional practice

In an overly assessed environment, it felt that the key focus of my action research was on the learning process rather than on assessment for the sake of assessing. Assessments must be marked and returned promptly. The longer it takes to return, the less significance the feedback has for the students. Students need to have hands-on experience of what formative assessment is, ideally before they reach A2, if it is to be effective. Time needs to be allocated during the course of the year to work on assessments. I now get the students to set their own targets independently and I get them to identify the specific area that they wish to improve. The student plays a significant role in their learning by being part of each phase (see Figure 2).

### For assessment for learning

I strongly believe that assessment for learning has a significant role to play in

Figure 2 Assessment phases



education. I believe it is most effective if it starts at an early age and is continuous throughout a child’s educational career. Continuity for the student is the key, in my opinion. The ideal scenario would be that the child is exposed to assessment for learning from the start of their educational experience right through to the end – be that college or university. On a smaller scale, assessment for learning and formative assessment can only be effective if it is supported and implemented across a school or college. If it is being done in ‘pockets’ then it will be very difficult to measure its overall impact and benefits on the students’ learning. If grades can have an effect on ego building, then it is vital that educational centres promote the fact that all students can succeed and learn there. As Black *et al.* (2002) wrote:

*Schools that emphasise excellence in achievement run the risk of sending the message that the only students who are valued are those that achieve the highest standards. Students whose performance falls below the highest levels come to believe that they cannot succeed and so disengage. Schools that value excellence in progress are sending the message that everyone can improve, and by feeding back to students about things that are within the students’ control, emphasise that further improvement is possible.*

## What next?

The success of this project has empowered me to feel confident in giving students no grades, and since this project, I have not given grades to any of my classes whatsoever. The students have adapted to this with a degree of ease. Because my approach is different from many of my colleagues’, it means my students take that little bit longer to adapt. They’re 16 years old – have they never had experience of formative assessment? Scarily, this is more often the case than not. Some colleagues have felt equally inspired by my project and are doing this with their own classes. Not everyone sees the benefits of formative assessment, but even adapting the concept so that a third of all assessments are treated in this manner goes a long way to encouraging students to see assessment as a life-long learning process.

## Further research?

If you are considering researching the impact and/or effectiveness of assessment for learning, these might be some areas to consider.

- Should the feedback be related to criteria that is translated into student-friendly language?

- Is formative assessment most effective throughout the entire year or only for certain pieces of work?
- Are students able to track their improvements and quantify this to a grade that corroborates their teacher's predicted grade in the subject?

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## Further reading

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Nicol, D. and Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006). 'Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice', *Studies in Higher Education*, 31, 2, 199–218.

Petty, G. (2006). *Evidence Based Teaching: A Practical Approach*. Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes.

## Weblinks

Information on how teachers can improve their feedback practice  
[www.heacademy.ac.uk/senlef.htm](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/senlef.htm)

Research on assessment for learning  
[www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/assessment\\_for\\_learning/?digest=all](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/assessment_for_learning/?digest=all)

For a list of resources regarding assessment for learning  
[www.qca.org.uk/7658.html](http://www.qca.org.uk/7658.html)

To read Rebecca's entire action research project visit  
[www.farnboroughsfc2.ac.uk/research/arp.aspx](http://www.farnboroughsfc2.ac.uk/research/arp.aspx)

## About the author

Rebecca Rhodes is Curriculum Manager of Psychology at Farnborough Sixth Form College. She has taught in New Zealand and Japan. Rebecca has a keen interest in encouraging students to be reflective in their work and to equip them with the techniques to aid their life-long learning process.

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