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Building students' evaluative and productive expertise in the writing classroom

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary notions of feedback involve students working alongside teachers and peers with a view to enhancing students' learning. It is no longer sufficient or fitting for teachers to be the primary source of feedback as this runs the danger of developing dependence on external sources for information about progress and learning. If students are to move from being recipients of feedback to intelligent self-monitoring, they need to take responsibility for their learning. With this end in mind, instructional programmes should provide students with authentic opportunities to monitor and improve the quality of work *during* production. Three elementary teachers who articulated similar beliefs about the importance of feedback and student involvement in their learning, and who described teaching practices congruent with the development of student autonomy, were observed during the teaching of a genre based writing unit. Observations revealed qualitative differences in the opportunities created for students to gain understanding of expectations, engage in evaluative and productive activities, and make decisions about their writing. These three cases show that developing students' evaluative knowledge and productive skills in writing involves adoption of AfL as a unitary notion and a radical transformation of the traditional taken-for-granted roles and responsibilities of teachers and students.

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1. Introduction

Assessment for Learning (AfL) is part of everyday practice by teachers, students and peers that seeks, interprets and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance learning (Klenowski, 2009). The overall aim of AfL is for students to become autonomous, self-regulating learners who "*judge performance relative to goals, generate internal feedback about amounts and rates of progress towards goals, and adjust further action based on that feedback*" (Butler & Winne, 1995, p. 258). Influenced by socio-cultural perspectives on learning, and developments in the fields of student self-regulation and assessment for learning, present-day notions of feedback emphasize the importance of learner autonomy and agency. It is no longer sufficient or fitting for teachers to be the primary or sole source of feedback as this runs the danger of developing and maintaining dependence on others for information about progress and achievement (Sadler, 2010), rather teachers and students work in partnership to construct achievement and effect improvement (Gardner, 2006). As students move from being recipients of information to a state of 'intelligent self-monitoring' (Sadler, 1989), they take ownership of and responsibility for their learning. Instructional programmes must therefore provide students with opportunities to monitor and regulate the quality of their work *during* production. Development of students' evaluative and productive expertise is contingent on three conditions: students need to understand the goals of learning and what constitutes quality work, compare current performance to what is expected, and have a repertoire of strategies so they can modify performance as necessary (Sadler, 1989, 2009).

This paper reports on an empirical study in the instructional area of writing where the practice of three teachers who articulated similar beliefs about the importance of feedback and student involvement in learning, and described teaching practices congruent with the development of student autonomy was examined. Two complementary fields of scholarship inform this examination: Sadler's (1989, 2007, 2009, 2010) seminal and more recent work in formative assessment, and a contemporary reading of Assessment for Learning (Swaffield, 2011; Willis, 2011). Findings from the study will be of interest to those with responsibility for teacher learning in the areas of teaching writing and/or assessment, whether these are in-house as part of school-driven initiatives, or externally driven as in the case of national, Ministry of Education endorsed professional development contracts.

2. Developing students' evaluative and productive expertise in writing

The most effective way for learners to grasp the nature of a complex activity such as writing is through direct experience in the creation, evaluation and revision of work – "*no amount of telling, showing or discussing is a substitute for one's own experience*" (Sadler, 2009, p. 49). Teachers need therefore to establish a pedagogical environment in which students are deliberately inducted into the art of making substantive and comprehensive appraisals of their own and peers' work, *during* production with a view to making improvements and furthering learning (Sadler, 2009, 2010). Authentic evaluative activities, operationalized through peer feedback and student self-monitoring, enable writers to assess the value and efficacy of texts while they are being created (Hout & Perry, 2009). Providing students with substantial evaluative experience is a strategic and deliberate part of the teaching design through which students are initiated into the 'guild knowledge' of the writing community (Marshall, 2004; Sadler, 2010). Central to this initiation is development of shared understandings between teachers and students, and among students, about the goal(s) of writing and what it is that constitutes quality when writing a particular kind of text.

2.1. The role of goals, learning intentions and success criteria

If learners are to play a central role in their learning, they need to understand 'where they are going' (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Failure to establish clear goals for writing is a significant obstacle to student revision of texts (Fitzgerald, 1987) and the development of successful writers (Timperley & Parr, 2009). In addition, learners need to understand what it is that comprises quality in piece of writing. New Zealand teachers have, in recent years, been encouraged to share and/or create goals of learning with students in the form of learning intentions and to use success criteria, rubrics, models

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