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## "HOW DO I KNOW THAT I HAVE LEARNT?" A FOCUS ON INVOLVEMENT IN LEARNING PROCESSES

*The article raises the question "What helps learners learn?" The author believes that active involvement of learners in the learning process implying free choice of educational tools and strategies, collaborative discussing criteria for assessing working results and continuous dialogue between participants of educational process, is an effective solution of the raised problem.*

**Keywords:** learning dialogue, assessment, assessment criteria, assessment of learning, assessment of achieving, self assessment, feedback, collaborative learning process, active involvement, discussion, personal achievement goals.

### "What did you learn in school today?"

As a new teacher I met a young man who had a philosophical approach to life. Like the Greek philosopher Socrates, this young man often asked big questions. The most interesting question I ever got was: "How do I know that I have learnt?" He was 7 years old. His question is ageless.

"What did you learn in school today?" must be one of the most asked questions in families with school children, worldwide. This question is rarely answered. When asking pupils why they don't tell, they say that the question is impossible. "I don't know", one teenager said, "but I can tell what I did".

We can safely assume that "doing" does not equal "learning", and I believe that few schools have been built in order to make pupils "do".

As teachers we plan lessons with great care, deliver what we have planned effectively, and sometimes we even manage to engage our pupils. The learning outcome, however, often has little or no relation to what was intended. It's like searching the internet: Even when pupils start at the same place, we can be certain that they, within minutes, will reach different pages.

What does the learner learn from the teacher's summative assessment?

When assessing a student's work, a teacher is, of course, able to tell whether a student "has learnt" or not. The teacher can also evaluate the quality of the work, and give grades/comments. This kind of assessment is useful

for simple tasks, like spelling, where the student is able to both understand and control the teacher's evaluation. But we should ask how effective this kind of feedback is for more complex tasks:

*Be a Northern Irish patriot, and tell your country's history. Present it in a timeline.*

*(English oral assignment, 8<sup>th</sup> grade).*

Teachers spend hours every week evaluating tasks like these: Make comments, correct, offer suggestions, give grades. But what does the student actually learn from our struggles? Do our efforts answer questions like "What in my work is better than my partner's, who got a 3?" "How can I get a 5?"

*"For more complex material, learning requires the development of new capabilities that requires a more dialogic kind of feedback, rather than the giving of correct answers, and therefore requires the learner to become active in managing the process."* (Elshout-Mohr 1994)

The key word here is *dialogue*. Unfortunately dialogue is also our problem: How do we find time for continuous, meaningful, individual learning dialogues in classes with 20 or 30 pupils? In my experience, we don't.

40 years ago Benjamin Bloom developed the idea of assessment as support for learning. He divided assessment into two categories: "Assessment for Learning" and "Assessment of Achieving".

Simplifying complex ideas is, as you know, a dangerous sport, but the frame below may show the main idea:

Assessment for learning	Assessment for learning / of achieving	Assessment of achieving
<u>On the way:</u> Information for the teacher and the learner. Needed to improve the learning process.	<u>Road marks:</u> Elements from both, Report cards, for instance twice a year	<u>The finish line:</u> Information to others. Shows the level of achievement the student had reached when the diploma was written.
<b>Formative assessment</b>	< -- >	<b>Summative assessment</b>

What helps the learner learn?

Paul Black and Dylan William (1998) has shown that specific feedback and self assessment, good quality of teaching and instructions, good social relations in the class (pu-

pil/teacher, pupil/pupil) and collaborative learning processes are the four elements that best help improving the learning process. Black and William also emphasize that learning is more effective when the learner understands what there is to

learn and what is expected, gets specific feedback about the quality of the work, participates in the assessment process and gets advice on how to improve.

Can the Columbus syndrome be escaped?

We have been told that when Christopher Columbus sailed out, he didn't know where he was going. When he arrived he didn't know where he was, and when he returned, he didn't know where he had been. As teachers we should sometimes reflect upon the Columbus syndrome, because the sad truth is that when our learners don't know exactly where they are going, where they are or where they have been, they probably will end up somewhere where they can't be reached.

Where am I? Where am I going? How do I take my next step? These questions should be asked and answered every day. Just by asking, the learner is involved, and who is better qualified to answer the first question than the learner? Of course the teacher is there, to help when needed, but the main participant is the learner. Active involvement in the learning process, not only helps the learner realize what she already knows, but also that there is more to learn, and that steps must be taken in order to achieve and when learning is

the focus point, teacher and learner can easily agree on *what* to learn next and *how* to learn.

**What tools do the learners have?**

A learner who knows only one learning strategy has no flexibility. When this strategy fails, there is no alternative, with little or no learning as a consequence.

Pupils easily understand that a Stone Age man had no choice: he had to use his stone axe when cutting trees. As modern humans, we can choose between several tools. Most pupils agree that they will choose the tool which will do the job most effectively. When asked which tool is the most effective, most of them conclude that it depends on the situation. There are of course some who would always use a motorized saw because it's cool, and why not? Why shouldn't they be allowed to do a job in a way which is fun, as long as the work gets done?

A learning strategy is a tool for learning, and a learners with different tools in their "box of knowledge", have choices: the fastest, the most effective, the most fun, the most interesting. When meeting a difficulty, they also have the tools to analyze the situation: "Do I have to use more time, do I need to change strategy or need I do both?"

Examples of learning strategies (Tools)	
<b>Reading</b>	<b>Activating pre-knowledge</b>
<p><u>Survey</u> (Skim &amp; scan)  <u>Question</u> (What do you want to find out from the text? Ask questions before reading)  <u>Read</u> (the whole text. Highlight main points)  <u>Recall</u> (Key words or choose other strategy)  <u>Review</u> (Check that recall notes are correct – add extra ones as you re-read).</p> <p><b>SQRRR = In-depth Reading</b></p>	<p><u>Mind map</u> (overview, show connection between ideas)  <u>Timeline</u> (record history, show events in chronological order, place events in relation to other events)  <u>Squares</u> ("see" what happens in a story or sequence of events)  <u>"Venn" diagram</u> (compare and contrast any two topics, show similarities &amp; differences)  <u>"Sociogram"</u> (show how elements within a topic or from different topics are "linked", or find "relationships")  <u>Test</u>.                      We train our learners to apply a tool at least three times during a working period: before starting, within the working period and before finishing.</p>

Example from English, 8<sup>th</sup> grade

**"What is good, and what is good enough?"**

The following is from an observation note made after a visit to a primary school. The achievement goal, presented to the 1<sup>st</sup>-grade pupils (6 years old), was "Learn to write the letter B, b".

Having introduced the letter, the teacher modeled writing the letter. After listening to comments on the forms of these letters, she asked the children to suggest criteria for "the perfect B". As there were lots of suggestions, which the teacher made notes of, she challenged the class to agree on 3: They decided that 1) "Bs are tall". 2) "Bs rest on the line." 3) "The "stomachs" are rounded". After writing practice, the class was divided into groups, where each pupil commented on his/her work, and received feedback from the others. The self assessment as well as the feedback, was accurate, but some pupils were criticized because their bs "turned the wrong way" (d instead of b – a quite common mistake) Three groups met this problem, which lead to rather heated discussions. The

"sinners" argued that "The way it turns is no criterion". All three groups, independently, concluded that the writer could not be criticized, but still the b should turn the right way. The sequence ended with the teacher asking the class if they wanted to change the criteria. They did.

These pupils were involved in their learning process. Not only did all of them, before this sequence ended, manage to write the letter; but many of them realized that they had work to do in order "write it better". These kids had used their tools to reflect upon their own work, they assessed it accurately, they gave and received constructive criticism, participated in an academic discussion and had ideas about what to do in order to reach a higher level of achievement.

On higher levels, the principles are the same. Of course we don't have the time to discuss and agree on criteria for each element of a complex task, but assessment criteria can be used and reused. When for instance assessing oral English presentations in last year's 10<sup>th</sup> grade classes, "language" was agreed upon as a useful assess-

ment criterion. Behind this word, we all knew there were lists, telling what to listen for, developed by the pupils in each class. Each list had been changed and added to as the pupils' knowledge of the English language grew.

Making assessment criteria for the *contents* of both oral and written assignments, however, is a returning challenge.

### "What is my achievement goal?"

Pupils work and function at different levels, and the older they are, the bigger their differences. Still our job, as teachers, is to help every learner achieve his/her very best.

Where I work we have found that a target profile is a useful tool, helping both learner and teacher find out what to focus on next:

Skills <sup>1</sup>	☉	What will improve	What to do	Evaluation
<b>Language</b> spelling sentences vocabulary				
<b>Writing</b> paragraphs linking words				
<b>Speaking</b> pronunciation fluency				
<b>Understanding</b> native speakers D texts				

<sup>1</sup>A similar form is used for tools and/or method.

English, 8<sup>th</sup> grade. August/September

Unfortunately the world is unfair. Some of us are born as tall, superblonds, others as talented academics and a few with no eye- or mind catching talents.

#### Aiming at the stars?

As teachers we belong to a worldwide family: we work in order to help the young generation become well functioning adults. The pupils we teach represent the work force in 10 – 40 years from now. We teach the future, and as few of us are equipped with crystal balls, we know little about it. What we do know, however, is that the future *will* be different, it *will* change and the changes will happen quickly.

The young philosopher I met 35 years ago, is now an electrician, and has been working as such since he completed his examinations in the early 90s. He tells me that the world of electricians has changed radically during the last 20 years, and what he learnt during his apprenticeship, does not qualify for the work he does today. He has been learning, continually, since he qualified, and what is more: he still is.

The concept of learning has, as you know, several definitions. I must confess that I would have to search the Internet or consult my library if pressed to quote any of them. But behind the linguistic nuances, we find a simple, idea: "Learning" is related to "flexibility", or better: to the "ability to change".

"It's difficult to predict, especially about the future," the Danish cartoonist Storm P told us. But if we believe that the future will ask for a flexible working force with the ability to adapt quickly to changes, then the learning of necessary skills must be integrated into the learning process. We need to educate lifelong learners.

We have found that the methods outlined above, mo-

tivate our pupils. Some of them actually say that "learning is cool", and many say that "school is OK" when asked anonymously on annual surveys. For years our school's academic results were below the national average. Now we have reached a little above, but, on behalf of our pupils, we aim higher.

Ilya Jakovlevich Kaplunovich, a distinguished academic, honored mentor and also a key note speaker at this conference, told about an observation he made at a visit at our institutel several years ago: the pupils had the same behavior whether the teacher could see them or not. There were no locked cupboards, no forbidden areas, all doors were open and during breaks teachers were few and seldom seen, spending their time in the staffroom or office area.

We were amazed hearing about this observation, but when reminded we remembered the effort and time we had spent in order to cultivate democratic and responsible attitudes among our pupils. In fact we still do so, but since this is an integral part of our school culture, we have kind of stopped feeling the effort. It's just routine.

We now hope that when Ilya Jakolevich Kaplunovich visits us again he will make another observation: learners who do their work, in dialogue with each other and their teachers, asking questions, discussing strategies, assessment criteria and personal achievement goals, expecting their teachers to support them in their learning processes. But their work will continue, whether the teacher sees them or not.

As teachers we have to aim at the stars.

Also many tanks to Ilya Jakolevich Kaplunovich for generously sharing his knowledge, experience, thought provoking ideas, patience and time for almost 20 years.

## RESOURCES

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Подано до редакції 24.10.12

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