An Alternative Approach to Working With Assessment in School
–How to Make Students Profit From Teachers' Feedback

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Abstract
A programme on assessment for learning has been running in Norwegian schools for years, and this has resulted in teachers putting much effort into making criteria lists and giving thorough feedback to students. One element of the programme that may have been less prioritized is the involvement of students in the assessment work. This study reports on experiences from a psychology class in secondary school, where the students were engaged in assessment processes by applying the following questions: 1) Why is it important with assessments during the learning process? 2) What types of feedback do you profit most from and become motivated by? 3) When is it challenging to understand feedback? 4) What do you want to focus on when you receive feedback? 5) How will you follow up the feedback from the teacher so that you can learn from it? The students reported that they wanted more oral feedback, as written feedback was often difficult to understand, and that they needed time to work with improving what they planned to focus on. The teacher followed up on the students' preferences in the following assessment process, and evaluations from students showed that of 22 students, 18 agreed that participating in the assessment work helped them understand the teacher's feedback, find out what was important for them to work on and develop their skills in the subject. Furthermore, 17 agreed that it gave them motivation and 11 agreed that they managed to follow up on their plans.

Keywords: Assessment, Feedback, Participation

Introduction

Research on feedback reveals a shift in assessment practices from summative to formative assessment (Black & William, 1998; Hattie & Timperly, 2007). This shift means moving from primarily assigning final, summative feedback, mostly in the form of grades, to viewing assessment and feedback as an integral part of the learning process. As described by Sadler (1989), formative assessment focuses on using evaluations of student work to enhance and shape their competence instead of relying on "trial and error learning" (p.120). The importance of involving learners in formative assessment processes is highlighted; learners should have a concept of the goal they are aiming for, be able to compare their current performance to this goal, and take action to bridge the gap.

Feedback has an essential role in formative assessment, surpassed only by the clarification of learning targets and success criteria for students (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Ruiz-Primo & Brookhart, 2018; Sadler, 1989). Echoing Sadler's (1989) description of formative assessment, Hattie & Timperly (2007) emphasize three key questions to be posed by either teacher or student for feedback to be effective: "Where am I going?" to define objectives or goals, "How am I going?" to evaluate current progress toward those goals, and "Where to next?" to identify the necessary actions to further enhance progress (Hattie & Timperly, 2007, p.86). Brookhart (2018) refers to the type of process described by Sadler (1989) and Hattie and Timperly (2007) as a "formative learning cycle" (p. 64) and highlights the importance of certain feedback characteristics in order for it to affect learning; it should be suitably worded and delivered, both teacher and student should learn from it, and the student must have appropriate opportunity to apply the feedback (Brookhart, 2018; Ruiz-Primo & Brookhart, 2018).

Formative assessment practices as described here have been implemented in the Norwegian educational system through national assessment regulations and in the national curriculum. It is affirmed in the regulations that all assessment until the completion of the subject's education should be formative, and that students have the right to participate in the assessment of their own work and reflect on their own learning, understand what they are expected to learn and what is expected of them, be informed about their proficiency, and receive guidance on how to continue to enhance their competence (Regulations to the Education Act, 2006, §3).

There has also been a focus on enhancing the competence of teachers in formative assessment through the national initiative *Assessment for learning* (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2014). A result appears to have been that students are provided with many detailed learning goals and long criteria lists for achieving different grades. However, there has been less focus on the role of the student as active in monitoring and regulating own learning (Horverak, 2015), which is an important aspect of formative assessment practices. These observations align with the results from The National Pupil Survey (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2022). This shows that while students often perceive teachers as conveying goals and expectations, they feel less involved in the assessment process and they could recive more feedback on how to improve.

These findings could be symptomatic of two notable gaps in the realm of assessment practices. The first gap relates to the extent to which students understand teachers' feedback, and the second gap to the extent to which students are proficient in using that feedback. This has led to the following research question: How can students be engaged in assessment

processes so that they profit more from teachers' feedback? In the following, an example of how students can be engaged in assessment work will be presented, as well as results from an intervention where this approach was applied. Finally the results will be discussed in relation to relevant theory on formative feedback.

Methodology

To investigate how students can be engaged in assessment processes to profit from feedback, an intervention was carried out in a psychology class in upper secondary school. A five-step method for mastery, participation and motivation (Langeland & Horverak 2021) was adjusted to the topic of assessment and applied in the class. The sample consists of 22 upper secondary school students. The approach implemented builds among others on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), emphasising the needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness as conditions for intrinsic motivation (figure 1).
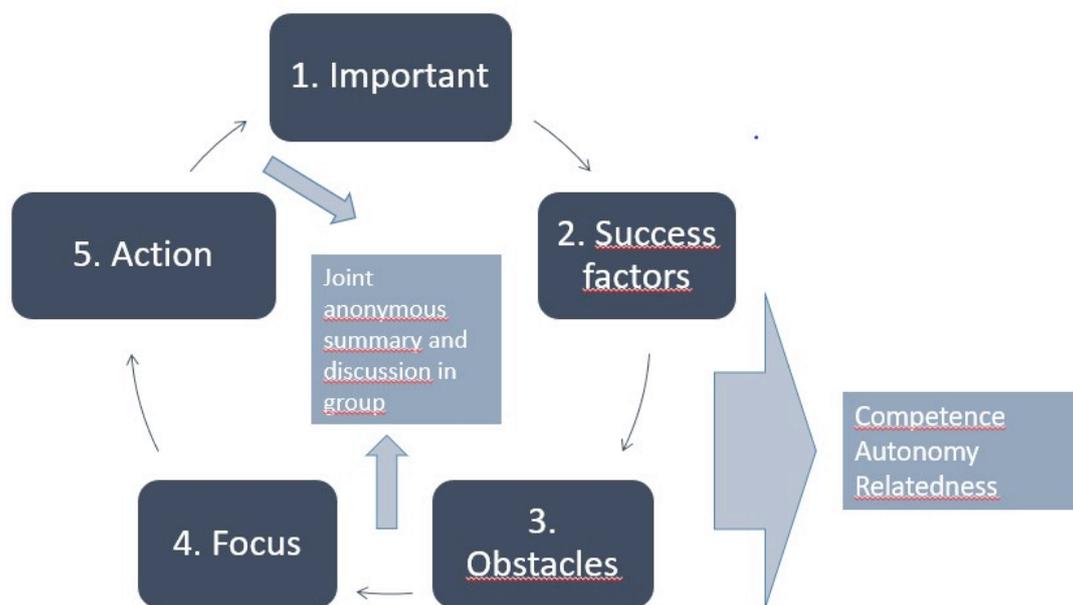

Figure 1. The five-step method (published in Horverak & Aanensen, 2019; Horverak, 2020)

The questions that were used were: 1) Why is it important with assessments during the learning process? 2) What types of feedback do you profit most from and become motivated by? 3) When is it challenging to understand feedback? 4) What do you want to focus on when you receive feedback? and 5) How will you follow up the feedback from the teacher so that you can learn from it? The answers to the questions were summed up in a PowerPoint to show a picture of the students' thoughts. These reflections served as important information to the teacher, and they also confirmed the two expected gaps in assessment and feedback – the students' lack of understanding the feedback, and the problem of how to work on it to improve. It was decided that the students should choose one specific aspect from the feedback to work on, with support from the teacher. The students also discussed with the teacher how, where, when and with whom they could work on it.

After the intervention, the participating students filled in evaluations with claims concerning the intervention and a five-point Likert-scale from "totally disagree" to "totally agree". The students considered whether participating in assessment processes had helped them find out

what was important to work on, whether it gave more motivation to follow up on the feedback, whether they had managed to follow up their own plans to work with a chosen topic, whether it helped them understand the teacher's feedback and whether it helped them develop their skills in the subject. They were also asked to give examples of what they had worked on , how they had worked with it, and how it had helped.

Results

First, some typical examples from the students' answers to the five questions in the intervention are presented, to show how the intervention worked. Second, the results from the evaluation are presented in a bar chart. This is complemented by examples of student reflections on the open questions from the evaluations.

To the first question, why it is important with assessments during the learning process, the students said that it helps them to improve and to master the subject. They know what to work on and how to develop their skills. They also reported that it helps them know what may cause a lower grade.

The second question consists of two different parts - what types of feedback the students profit from, and what types they get motivated by. The students said that they profitted from both written and oral feedback. From written comments, they profitted from short comments and keywords, while from oral feedback, they profitted from the possibility to ask questions and from examples shown by the teacher. To the second part of this question, what they get motivated by, the students mentioned compliments and positive comments, but also specific comments about what needs to be improved.

The answers to the third question clearly show the first gap in the assessment problem: The students often do not understand the teachers' feedback. They reported that they get confused by the mismatch of positive comments followed by a low grade, and that it is an obstacle that they do not know how to work on aspects the teacher say they should improve. Another challenge mentioned is that they think the teacher does not have time to talk to them and answer questions. One of the students commented that it is difficult 'when the teacher just writes a lot on the paper and expects me to understand'. Another challenge mentioned by a student is that sometimes the grade does not make sense in relation to the efforts made to complete the task. It is also mentioned that the feedback is not specific enough.

The answers to question the fourth and the fifth question show the second gap in relation to feedback practices – the problem students have to follow up on the feeback. Question four, what to focus on, and five, how to follow up, were difficult for the students to answer. They said that they wanted to focus on what they did wrong and what needed to be improved, and some wanted to focus on just the grade, and did not read the comments at all. On question five, how to follow up on the feedback, one student said that 'I do not know, I need help to know how to work with the feedback', and another one said 'l try to understand the feedback'. Others said they would work harder and practice, and some pointed to the lack of time to follow up the feedback.

After having discussed what to follow up on and how, some of the aspects that stood out, and which the students wanted to work on, were how to write good introductions and closures, and how to use references and theory. One suggestion on how to work on these topics, was that the teacher should explain and show through relevant examples. Another one was that

the students were to work with their chosen aspect for improving, in groups or alone, and guided by the teacher when needed.

The evaluation of this intervention shows that the students benefitted from this way of working with assessment.
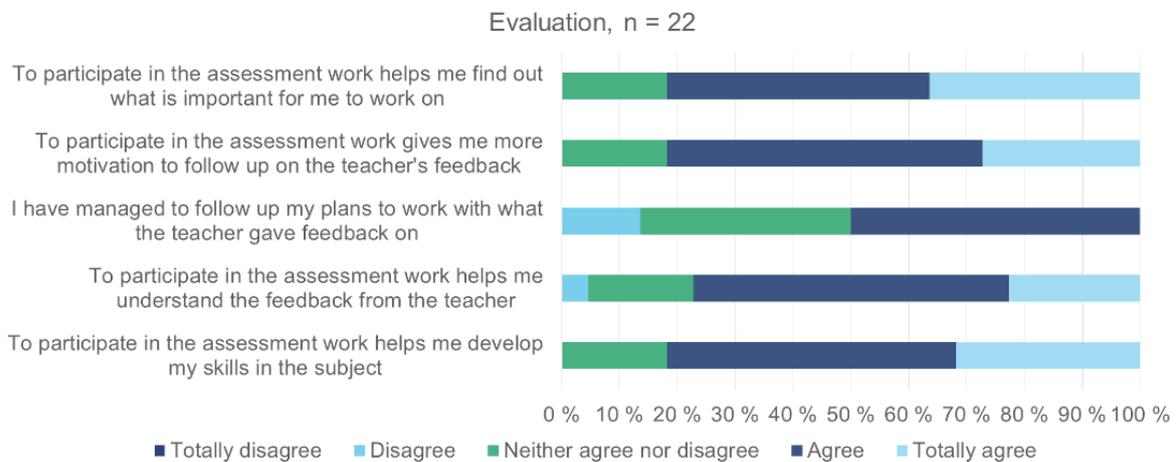

Figure 2. Evaluation

Of 22 students, over 80 % agreed that participating in assessment work helped them find out what was important to work on, gave more motivation to follow up and helped them develop their skills. Just below 80 % agreed that it helped them understand the feedback from the teacher. However, only 50 % agreed that they followed up their plans to work with what the teacher gave feedback on.

The students also reflected on what they had worked on and improved. One student reported, "I have tried to understand the feedback I have received, and that we have gone through it (the five points) in class. This has helped me a lot to get a more coherent assignment". Another student commented on working thoroughly with sources:

> I have worked on referring to other sources, as statistics and research. I worked on this by using a previous presentation from an assignment and find more sources I could have used. This has helped me as I have used time in class, and not only on my own at home.

Finally, some of the students commented on having become better at writing closures, "I have worked on improving the closure. To improve, I have asked questions and looked at good examples on the internet concerning how a good closure should be. This has helped me strengthen my presentation". These examples show a consciousness about own improvements after having followed up on the feedback.

Discussion

The results of this study show that to get more students engaged in assessment work, and to ensure that they profit from feedback, it is important to take students' voices seriously, and follow up on their reflections on their own learning process. Students want more oral feedback, as written feedback is experienced as unclear and difficult to understand. They also

need specific comments to get motivation to follow up, and the students' comments reported above shows that it is sometimes a problem that the feeback is not specific enough. This could be related to unclear criteria or goals for the assignment. When doing assignment, knowing 'where I am going' is a crucial aspect (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Based on the answers to the final two questions on what is to be focused on and how to proceed, it is clear that the students are uncertain about how to follow up on the feedback. They do not choose specific focus areas, but rather focus on understanding the feedback, and getting help with this. Whether or not the goals and criteria have been clearly defined by the teacher, the students answers indicate that it is somewhat unclear to the students where they are going and what they need to improve. Then it is also difficult for them to know where to 'go next' (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and progress in their learning.

It may be a challenge to spend much time on following up on assessment in class, as there might not be enough time to get through what the teacher has planned for the semester based on competence aims. Then one should reflect on - What is most important? That the teacher gets through the plan. or that the students develop their skills in the subject? The students want to practice on what they struggle with and do wrong. It is difficult for students to make and follow up a plan to improve, if the teacher does not give them time to follow up on comments from feedback. Working with feedback to improve what is challenging is an important aspect of formative assessment (Black & William, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007), and results in more efficient learning. The process described in this intervention, where students are engaged in the assessment process, and work on following up in class, could be one example of a 'formative learning cycle' (Brookhart, 2018, p. 64), where there is focus on the goals of learning activities, how to proceed and how to follow up in future work.

Another challenge is that students easily focus on the grade and not the comments when they receive feedback. This may lead to increased external motivation and decreased intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In order to support students to become intrinsically motivated, it may be an idea to hold back grades, and work with comments before a final grade is given. As mentioned by the students, giving specific feedback also supports motivation. As pointed out by Brookhart (2018), feedback should be suitably worded and delivered. Based on the students' reflections revealed in the results of the current study, this means that it should be specific and given through oral communication.

Conclusion

Engaging students in feedback processes as described in this study, shows an example of formative assessment practices and how students may work to follow up on feedback (Black & William, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The majority of the students reported that they profited from participating in assessment processes. It helped them find out what was important to work on, gave motivation, helped them understand the feedback and helped them develop their skills. However, the evaluations in the study showed that only half of the students reported that they followed up on their plan to improve. This shows that it is important to support students to find time to follow up and evaluate their own process.

The students in this study chose to work with general skills as making a good introduction or closure, when they were to follow up on the feedback. These are skills that could be transferred to different subjects. Hence, the intervention shows an example of how one can work with feedback to develop transferrable skills, which is a general goal in all education

(Pelegrino & Hilton, 2012). This is also in line with the renewal of the knowledge promotion for Norwegian schools (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017).

Even though this study shows promising results, this is a limited study. It is a case-study showing how this approach worked in one psychology class, with one teacher. There is a need for further investigation of the potential of engaging students in assessment work, and more extensive and longitudinal studies across different subjects and contexts.

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