

Developing an assessment system for international schools which follow the UK National Curriculum

Abstract

This article describes the development of an assessment system in an international school which broadly follows the UK's National Curriculum. Particular reference is made to how the system is applied to the assessment and grading of students' work in design and technology at Key Stage 3. The relationship between the school's internal system and the external standards of National Curriculum attainment target level descriptors is also explored.

Introduction

The English Schools Foundation (ESF) operates 15 schools in Hong Kong and offers education through the medium of English to a truly international student body. As with many international schools around the world, the ESF curriculum is based on that of the UK with modifications, where appropriate, to reflect the context of the region; in this case Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. Shatin College is one of five ESF secondary international schools and it is in this establishment that the following work on assessment was developed.

Background to the development of the scheme

In 1994 Shatin College students at Key Stage 3 were following a modified version of the UK National Curriculum. There were no standardised tests in school and reporting at National Curriculum levels at the end of a key stage was not a requirement. Each year the students received interim reports and profiles which recorded their attainment against the "level expected". There was general concern amongst staff that the "level expected" meant significantly different things to different people, that the system of assessment throughout the year was not always consistent with the attainment shown on profiles and that both between and within departments there were enormous variations in the system, which made much of our feedback incomprehensible, and therefore largely useless.

A working party was established with the aim of producing a more consistent, meaningful and effective assessment policy. After much research and many meetings with interested parties, a list of assessment principles was agreed and a uniform grading system was formulated.

Assessment principles

1. Assessment should be carried out in order to assist with the students' learning and academic development, to provide information to relevant parties about the progress and achievement of individuals and to assist in the evaluation of teaching programmes.
2. Assessment should be carried out in a variety of styles (formal/informal, written/oral, individual/group. etc.) in accordance with the specified aims of the specific course. Comprehensive and effective assessment will include the following:
 - a. **Formative Assessment:** so that the positive achievements of the student may be recognised and discussed and the appropriate next steps may be planned.
 - b. **Diagnostic Assessment:** through which learning difficulties may be scrutinised and classified so that appropriate remedial help and guidance can be provided.
 - c. **Summative Assessment:** for recording the overall achievement of a student in a systematic way.
 - d. **Evaluative Assessment:** to compare and aggregate information about students' achievements so that it can be used to assist in curriculum development and the evaluation of teaching and learning.
3. Assessment should be curriculum led and integrated into the delivery of the curriculum.
4. Assessment should be efficient and manageable.
5. Feedback should be specific, positive and encouraging whenever possible, raising the expectation of success rather than failure. Negative feedback should address the performance of the student rather than the individual.

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6. Students should be encouraged to become fully involved in their own assessment. This will result in students being more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses and of the strategies for improvement.

7. Assessment should ensure that individual learning is clearly targeted and that shortcomings are quickly identified and remedied, thus contributing towards higher standards.

8. There should be logical and realistic progression in the assessment programme within and between years, including the progression from primary to secondary school.

9. Departments should clearly communicate assessment procedures and criteria for units of work or specific tasks whenever feasible to allow students to have an unambiguous understanding of what teachers are looking for and to allow them to see why their efforts receive the given feedback and how they might respond to it.

10. Assessment should help in the regular communication of information about students to them, their parents, form tutors, heads of year and any other interested parties, both on-going and in the form of reports, profiles, references and parents evenings.

11. Discussion with students about the assessment of their work should take place as frequently as possible. Teacher comments should praise achievements and improvement, whilst encouraging self-assessment, reflecting on strategies

for improvement and setting of realistic goals and targets for the future.

12. All staff should keep a clear and comprehensive record of assessments carried out.

Key Stage 3 grading system

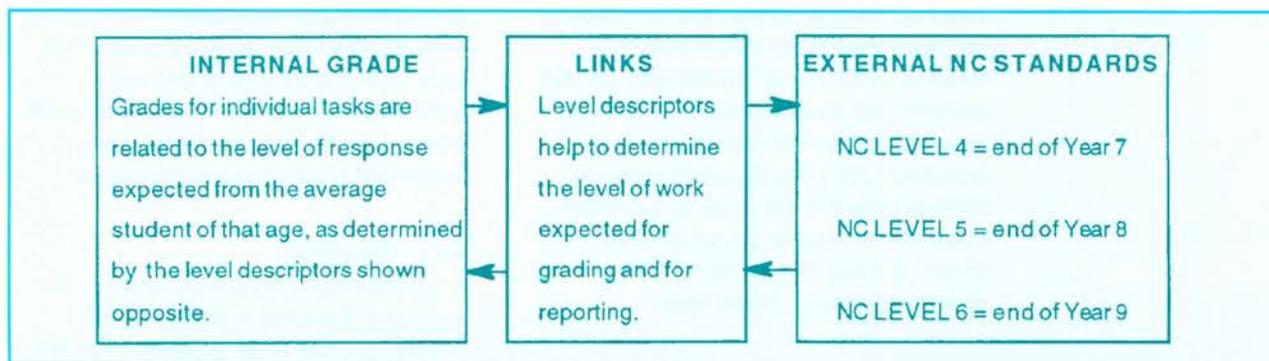
Grades are allocated, where appropriate, to provide feedback about academic achievement. Not all tasks are necessarily graded but when they are our grading system is based on the letters A-E. This is because we feel that a five-point scale is appropriate for differentiating between the range of abilities present in the school and that a common system assists clarity, consistency and meaningfulness.

The system is criterion-referenced, based on comparison with standards established by the National Curriculum and its level descriptors (or departments' own modified versions where applicable). This system best suits the primary function of marking, which is to provide feedback about academic achievement, whilst also allowing more valid comparisons of results and reducing the chances of misinterpretation of marks. The relationship between the internal grading system and the external National Curriculum standards is shown in figure 1.

The cumulative grades awarded throughout a period of time relate directly to the end of period reporting on student profiles. In this way, there is a clear and unambiguous link between the grades awarded throughout the year and the summative element of what is reported to students and parents.

All departments have been encouraged to study their level descriptors to ensure that

Figure 1



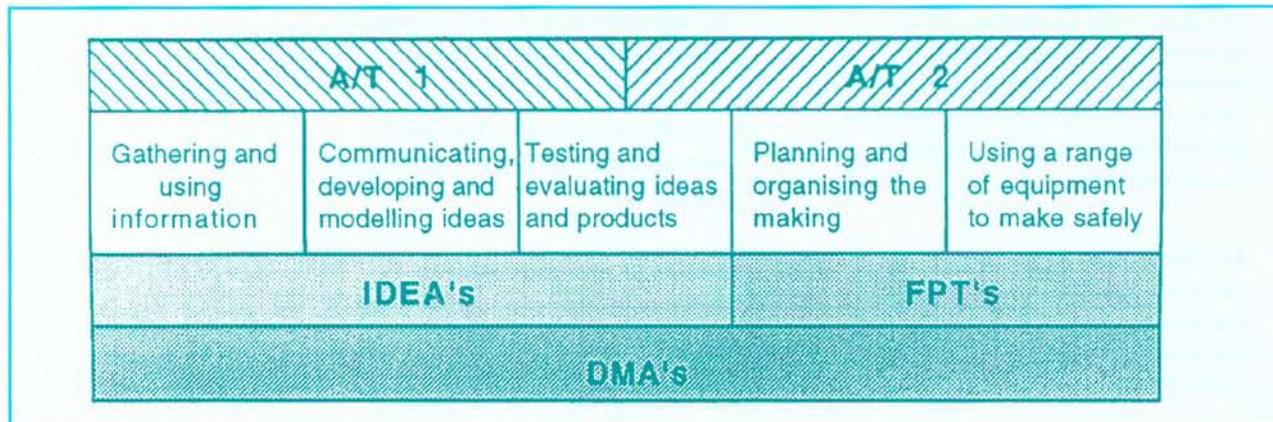


Figure 2

their work programmes and tasks are appropriate for the range of abilities likely in each age group. Competence in completing those tasks which test the student's ability against the level descriptor aimed at that age group will determine a 'C' Grade.

There is a choice, when determining the criteria for higher and lower grades, of either having a range of grades within the same level descriptor, or of expecting students to be at different levels within the same year group. It is necessary to have two systems operating because in some subjects the level descriptors are content based and do not, therefore, allow students to work at different levels. Such subjects have to produce their own criteria for grades. Whichever system is used, the key is for each subject to set their assessment criteria for the level expected by careful study of the level descriptors.

Adapting the grading system for design and technology

The first task for the design and technology staff was therefore to consider what criteria could be adapted from the National Curriculum level descriptors to form the basis of the departmental grading scheme. Earlier Orders contained the same two Attainment Targets as the 1995 Orders but they were divided into five strands. However, whilst similar requirements are still present in the current Orders, they are not presented as discrete strands. The department felt it was important to assess ability in each of these areas so a decision was made to retain an almost identical version of these earlier strands in the assessment criteria. These were:

- a. gathering and using information
- b. communicating, developing and modelling ideas
- c. testing and evaluating ideas and products
- d. planning and organising the making
- e. using a variety of equipment to make products safely.

There were a number of advantages in retaining these sub-headings. Firstly, we stayed with manageable criteria with which the students and staff were already familiar and secondly, existing departmental record cards and school profiles would only require slight modification. In short, we were able to offer greater consistency and continuity between the old system and the new. The relationship between attainment targets, these curriculum strands and the preferred methods of delivery, is outlined in figure 2.

The next step was to extract key points from the level descriptors for each of the strands, wording them clearly and simply. Finally, the statements had to be differentiated to reflect varying performance on a five-point A to E scale. After a great deal of discussion, testing and refining, the following statements emerged as the design and technology department's internal grade descriptors:

AT 1: Designing

A = Researches a topic thoroughly for the age group. Proposes a good range of realistic solutions to the problem. Ideas are

extremely well presented using the most appropriate and effective techniques. Selects and justifies the most appropriate solution.

B = Researches a topic well for the age group. Proposes viable solutions to the problem. Ideas are well presented using appropriate techniques. Selects an appropriate solution and says why.

C = Researches a topic adequately for the age group, occasionally needing help. Proposes solutions, one of which is reasonably viable. Ideas are fairly well presented. Chooses an appropriate solution with guidance.

D = Conducts limited research for the age group, with help. Produces a possible solution which may not be fully viable. Ideas are not clearly presented. Requires help to arrive at a suitable solution.

E = Unable to research a topic. Cannot produce solutions without considerable assistance. Work poorly presented. Requires extensive help to arrive at a solution.

A/T 2: Making

A = Able to devise or follow a work plan accurately. Works to a high level of accuracy, displaying excellent practical skills for the age group. Gives a realistic, critical evaluation.

B = Able to devise or follow a work plan. Works to a satisfactory level of accuracy, displaying good practical skills for the age group. Gives a detailed evaluation.

C = Can devise or follow a simple work plan with help. Works to a fair degree of accuracy with reasonable practical skills for the age group. Gives an evaluation which covers the obvious points.

D = Needs considerable assistance to follow a work plan. Work lacks accuracy and skill levels are quite poor for the age group. Produces only a superficial evaluations of the obvious points.

E = Cannot follow a work plan. Work is very inaccurate and skill levels are very poor for the age group. Produces confused/irrelevant/no evaluation.

Copies of the above criteria are displayed in all areas of the department so that students are familiar with them. Awarded grades are conveyed to students in a small marking box which is reproduced on all departmental design sheets:

DESIGNING		MAKING		
Gather & use info.	Ideas	Evaluating	Planning	Making

In addition to subject-specific criteria, the teaching staff agreed on four whole-school 'general criteria' which would be commented on in school profiles. These were:

Attitude to study:

contributes positively
is well motivated and works to the best of ability

Organisation of materials:

has the materials needed
organises materials well

Organisation of time:

plans efficiently
meets deadlines

Presentation:

titles and dates work
sets out work neatly and appropriately.

These general criteria were graded on a three point scale of Always/Usually/Irregularly. All of the above data is stored on pupil record cards held in each department for each subject.

Evaluation of the scheme

The scheme was implemented in September 1995 and has been closely monitored since that time. It is clear that it has been effective in both rationalising and standardising marking, grading and

recording across the whole school. Feedback suggests that parents and students find the use of grades clearer and less confusing than the previous use of attainment levels. Staff find the system manageable both in terms of marking work and recording progress. Commenting on the school assessment policy a recent OFSTED inspection noted that "the principles embedded in it are excellent". However, the inspectors also stated that:

"the time is now right for the college to review the impact of the single grading system currently used on students' progress and morale, particularly on those who consistently receive grade A and the minority who consistently receive D or E."

In response to this, stronger links between the grading system and existing work on creating different teaching and learning strategies for students of different abilities are being explored. Nevertheless, students and parents are kept well informed about academic progress and they can look forward to more improvements with further evolutionary refinements of the system.

It is vital that the allocation of grades is not seen as the end of the assessment process. These grades will assist in monitoring the progress of students, the setting of appropriate targets for the future and in the on-going evaluation of the whole process of teaching and learning.

References

Brain, P Inspection Services Unit, Manchester Metropolitan University (1996) English Schools Foundation.